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Illustration

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The Unwanted Undead Adventurer







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Yu Okano / Jaian



“Oh?! Ah,
okay. I see.
Like this?”



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The Unwanted Undead Adventurer

Author Yu Okano

Illustrator Jaian



Characters



Sheila Ibarss

A receptionist at the guild.
Knows Rentt's secret.



Lorraine Vivie

A scholar and
Silver-class adventurer.
Assists Rentt after
he became undead.



Rentt Faina

An adventurer seeking to
reach Mithril-class. Turned
undead after being eaten by
a dragon in a dungeon.



Edel

A monster called a puchi suri
who lived under an orphanage.
He sucked Rentt's blood and
became his vampiric servant.



Alize

A girl who lives at an
orphanage. Her dream is to be
an adventurer. She became
Rentt and Lorraine's disciple.



Rina Rupaage

A novice adventurer
who helped Rentt and
dragged him to town after
he became a ghoul.



Wolf Hermann

Maalt's guildmaster. He
invited Rentt to become a
staff member at the guild.



Isaac Hart

A man who serves the Latuule
family. He's powerful enough
to survive in the Tarasque
Swamp.



Laura Latuule

The head of the Latuule family.
She collects magic items as a
hobby. She requested that Rentt
periodically deliver dragon
blood blossoms to her.



Nive Maris

A Gold-class adventurer and vampire hunter. She's currently considered the closest person to reaching Platinum-class.



Gharb Faina

Rentt's great aunt, a teacher of medicine, and a magician.



Capitan

Hathara's top hunter and an advanced spirit user.



Wilfried Rucker

A greatsword-wielding Mithril-class adventurer. After an encounter with a young Rentt, he promised that they would meet again.



Jinlin

Rentt's childhood friend who dreamed of becoming an adventurer. She was killed by a wolf.



Myullias Raiza

A Lobelian saint who has been blessed by a divine spirit. She has the power to control divinity and specializes in healing and purifying.

Summary

Rentt, the eternal Bronze-class adventurer, became undead after he was eaten by a dragon. He used the unique monster trait called Existential Evolution to become a ghoul. After Rina, a new adventurer, helped him leave the dungeon, he ended up living with Lorraine in the city of Maalt. Going by an alias, he once again began to work toward becoming a Mithril-class adventurer. Rentt and his allies, with the help of Nive and Isaac, manage to defeat the vampires attacking the city of Maalt. Thanks to Laura's blood, Rentt undergoes another Existential Evolution, and Isaac offers to teach him and Rina, his new familiar, how to use the vampiric ability called "Division."

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Chapter 4: The Tower and the Academy

Side Story: Noel Kruege

Chapter 5: A Request from the Guild



Chapter 1: Evaluating Abilities

At the Latuule estate, there was a space called “the yard” that was sandwiched between the manor itself and the hedge maze. There was also a courtyard located on the other side of the manor, but a garden and plots of medicinal herbs took up the entire space, which made it unsuitable for our purposes.

As we stood in front of the hedge maze, Isaac explained, “Even if you make a bit of a mess, it’s easy enough to repair using the maze’s power. So please, feel free to unleash your powers as you see fit.”

I knew it was a little late to be wondering about this, but I couldn’t help but ask, “I heard a magic item created the hedge maze. Is that true?”

“Ah, yes, it is. I’m told it’s an ancient relic that was designed to artificially recreate the conditions of a real dungeon. However, it can’t create monsters or expand its territory like a real dungeon can.”

I was relieved to hear that. It was a bit frightening to think that this, too, was a dungeon with a dungeon core.

Laura was a dungeon master, and since she wanted to protect the city of Maalt, perhaps it wasn’t much of a problem. But, one day, she might decide to step away from the role. Laura had lived for a long time, so it wasn’t something I needed to worry about. Still, my mind couldn’t help but jump to the worst-case scenario. Of course, even if that did happen, there wasn’t a whole lot I could do about it. I *could* take her place as dungeon master. That didn’t sound so bad, but Laura had mentioned something about lots of constraints to the role. It probably wasn’t a great idea.

“So,” I started, “it’s okay if I break something, right? Good to know.”

Isaac nodded. “Yes. Then, shall we begin? First, we should test your physical abilities and other capabilities.”



I started with testing out my arm strength. I picked up a rock from the ground and squeezed it in my hand. The rock immediately cracked and shattered before crumbling into dust in my grip.

“I know you have a monster’s body, but it’s still remarkable,” said Lorraine as she watched from close by. “You aren’t using any physical enhancement spells, right?”

“Nope. Seems like my arm is quite a bit stronger than it was. It’s kind of a problem, really. I even crushed a doorknob earlier.”

“Rentt, you better not break the doorknobs in my home,” Lorraine said with a stern look.

It wasn’t like I had wanted to break it. Obviously, I didn’t intend to crush any doorknobs in Lorraine’s house, but I’d be in trouble if I couldn’t figure out how to hold back.

This reminded me that I wasn’t the only one adjusting to a new body. Someone else here was acclimating to their new existence.

“What about you, Rina? How’s your strength and all?” I asked.

“Ah, I haven’t tested it yet.”

I picked up another rock, put it in her hand, and told her to squeeze it.

“Hrrrm!” She really put a lot of effort into it, and finally the rock shattered. “Wow!” she said, looking surprised. She probably hadn’t been able to do that when she was a human.

There were plenty of ridiculous people in the world, and it wasn’t that no one else could crack a rock with their bare hands. I was pretty sure Mithril-class adventurers could pull off that feat. Maybe even some Gold-and Silver-class adventurers who had made a name for themselves could do it too. But before she became a vampire, Rina had just started out as an adventurer. There was no way she would have been able to break a rock.

“Looks like your physical abilities have increased as well,” I stated.

Isaac nodded. “I believe Miss Rina is comparable to a lesser vampire. Ghouls are often stronger than that, but she’s still much stronger than an ordinary

person. How are you feeling about your mana?”

Isaac had directed that question to both of us, so Rina and I decided to test out some magic. Rina, however, didn't know much magic, so I decided to go first.

“Let's see. Fire, use my mana as your fuel and manifest before me. Aliumage!”

It was a basic spell that I'd used before. Still, since it had behaved strangely the last time I cast it, everyone had stepped back to give me plenty of space. It turned out that they were right to be cautious.



“This is closer to arson than it is to ignition,” I mumbled as I watched the pillar of flame burn in front of me.

I was a bit worried that the hedge maze might catch fire, but it only smoldered when the flames neared it. Was it because the plants were alive and wet, or was it something else? Given the scale of the flames, I was pretty sure even a living tree would combust. Perhaps the hedge maze had special properties that kept it from burning.

Once the flames had subsided, the three of them approached. Wide-eyed, Rina said, “I can’t use a spell that powerful! You know that, right?”

“You seem to be operating under a misunderstanding,” Lorraine explained. “That was Aliumage, a basic life magic spell. As long as they have enough mana to activate magic, anyone should be able to use it. There’s no reason you couldn’t cast it, Rina.”

Rina and Lorraine had apparently had plenty of time to get acquainted while I was asleep. They seemed pretty comfortable with each other. Evidently, Lorraine felt she’d gained a little sister and a lab rat, while Rina felt she’d gained a big sister and a delicious morsel. That sounded pretty creepy, but if they were fine with it, it was probably okay.

While I was thinking that over, Rina looked at Lorraine in shock. “Wait, that was life magic? I mean, that’s the incantation he used, but are life spells supposed to be so strong they burn down an entire house like that one just did?”

“Life magic spells have very limited effects, but they don’t require a lot of mana. They’re only useful for things like mundane chores around the house. Well, the term is an imprecise phrase in common parlance. There’s a more technical academic name for them, but since only scholars use it, let’s set that aside for now. At any rate, by that definition, Rentt’s spell was life magic but not actually life magic.”

“Just as I thought,” I murmured.

The snack and the lab rat looked at me like I’d grown two heads. They were being a little mean, in my opinion.

I was only joking about the whole snack and rat thing. Although, I figured Rina would feed on Lorraine at some point, and Lorraine would absolutely experiment on Rina. At any rate, we needed to continue our evaluation.



I could tell my mana had increased quite a bit. Still, there were plenty of people who had a lot more mana than I did. But compared to when I was alive, I was now about as strong as 150 Rentts. Well, that was just a guess.

In terms of class, I was probably on par with an average Gold-class adventurer. However, I still wasn't that good with magic, so I was pretty sure I'd lose to a Bronze-class mage in an actual fight. I was okay with that as long as I took into account overall ability.

"Rina, you don't need to compare yourself to Rentt," Lorraine said. "He's odd in all sorts of ways. You can't include him in the sample set, because as an outlier, he throws off the average."

I guess I wasn't suitable for comparison, but she could've been a little more tactful about it. Then again, this was nothing new either.

I was aware that I had always been a bit of an oddball, even before I became undead. For example, I hadn't been all that strong, but I did possess spirit, mana, *and* divinity. And I had been fixated on solo adventuring despite my weaknesses.

Ordinarily, most adventurers at the level I'd been before I died would have given up and gone looking for a new job. Or they would have teamed up with other adventurers, working jobs appropriate to their level until they'd saved enough to become an innkeeper or a merchant. That was an average adventurer's life.

All the people I used to be friends with who never really blossomed as adventurers all ended up going that route in the end. Sometimes I wondered how they were doing. Not many stuck around Maalt. Adventurers were really just wanderers with a need to roam; few put down roots in their hometowns.

I was getting off topic, though.

"Still, I'm also a lesser vampire, or something like one, so aren't I also an

outlier like Rentt?" Rina asked Lorraine.

Rina seemed surprisingly calm about all this. Or maybe it wasn't that surprising. Even when she first met me, she'd been surprised and a little shy at first, but once she accepted who and what I was, she hadn't hesitated to help me. When I'd said I couldn't go home because of my appearance, Rina had kept insisting it was possible. When it came to optimism, she was always far more upbeat and forward-looking than I was.

Lorraine thought for a moment and nodded. "That's certainly possible given that Rentt gave you some of his blood. That's something we can confirm through testing. Which reminds me... It's a bit late to ask now, but aren't you shocked or surprised that you're now a vampire, Rina? You seem awfully nonchalant about the whole thing. You didn't panic when Isaac described you as a lesser vampire. At the time, you hadn't had time to process it. But that's certainly not the case anymore, is it?"

"Oh. You know, when you put it that way, you're right," Rina replied. "I guess normally I'd be a little more confused. But I already knew Rentt. Good people are still good even if they become monsters. Besides, it seems like my emotions are a little more subdued now."

"Ah, so you'd already processed that shock because you met Rentt as a ghoul. I believe Rentt mentioned something about his emotions becoming less pronounced when he became undead. Is this a common occurrence, Isaac?"

"Yes," Isaac confirmed. "Given that I was born a vampire, I haven't experienced it myself. However, it does appear to occur when a human becomes a vampire. It's not as though they lose all emotions or anything of the sort, though. A gentleman I knew who'd become a vampire described it to me. You do become calmer, and you think more rationally."

"I thought Rentt and Rina were rare examples," Lorraine remarked. "There are still humans who become vampires?"

"As my mistress noted, sometimes a vampire will create a partner by turning a human. However, it's not a common occurrence as far as I'm aware. Modern vampires mostly choose partners from among other vampires. There are some that couple with humans for a lark, but even in those cases, it's rare that they'll

turn them.”

That meant vampires could have children with other vampires. I didn’t know anything about vampires creating a partner, but every so often I’d hear rumors of that sort of ‘play.’ Most of the time, the rumors about half-vampire, half-human children—dampirs—were outright lies or a misunderstanding.

In rural villages, sometimes people would be mistakenly labeled as a dampir and ostracized for it. However, it almost always turned out that they weren’t actually dampirs, but people who had a special magic eye that they couldn’t control, or people who had too much mana and were unconsciously manifesting magic around them. Real dampirs were probably about as rare as Mithril-class adventurers. I’d never seen one. But there were countless monsters I’d never seen before in person.

These fake dampir reports tended to gather a lot of attention, so I usually went out of my way to investigate them for spending money. I usually found something useful like someone with a magic eye or someone with too much mana. I didn’t want to do anything creepy like using them as sacrifices or transplanting their magic eye into me. I did it because it was useful for mages looking for apprentices or knightly orders and armies looking for promising recruits. In the end, very few really had those unique abilities.



“I’d certainly like to ask more about vampires and their ecology,” Lorraine said, “but I suppose that can wait. At any rate, it’s safe to assume that Rina’s nonchalance stems from a combination of the effects of becoming a vampire and the fact that she’s already familiar with people who have turned into monsters. I’m glad she’s not the sort to fall into a blind panic.”

Rina tilted her head. “What would you have done if I had panicked?”

“If you would’ve listened to reason, I’d have sat you down and talked to you about it until you understood. You’ve suddenly become a vampire; a little panic or confusion would be natural. But if it seemed like you might start declaring you’ve become a vampire...”

“And if I had done that?”

“I might’ve had to eliminate you. You would have been a threat. I would have had no choice.”

Lorraine had said this casually, as though she was stating the obvious. That made her words all the more unnerving. It wasn’t that she was heartless. She just tempered her emotions with rationality. If she only had two choices, she’d immediately choose the more important outcome and discard the alternative.

In this case, it would’ve been a choice between Rina and me. It wasn’t that she saw Rina as a nuisance, but if she had no other choice, she’d eliminate her.

I was really glad that Rina was such a positive person. When I thought about it, most people would have reacted a bit more negatively to Lorraine’s words. Rina’s sensibilities, however, were a bit different from normal. Perhaps it was due to the fact that her emotions were a bit more subdued now as a vampire.

In a perfectly level tone, Rina said, “I see. But is that something someone would actually do? I mean, if you went around yelling you’d become a vampire, you’d end up in jail or worse, right? I’m not in any hurry to die. Though, I guess it’s unclear whether a vampire is actually alive or dead.”

“True,” Lorraine agreed. “But some people don’t think too deeply and immediately go to the church for help, thinking they could do something for them. I couldn’t dismiss the possibility out of hand.”

“Ah. That’s true. I could see that happening.”

Most people would probably think the church could fix them if they became undead. That was because all religious organizations treated the undead as unclean or tainted creatures. They were stocked with priests and saints who could use divinity for this reason. Someone who had become undead would naturally cling to the hope that such a power could cure them.

That was definitely not the case, though. The cleansing that priests and saints utilized erased tainted creatures from this world; it didn’t turn them back into a human. They might be able to help if someone were possessed by a wraith or the like by exorcising the monster, but if the person’s body had already turned completely into a monster... As far as I knew, it wasn’t possible to reverse the process. It was a waste of time to even try. If anything, it was pretty much like volunteering to be beheaded.

"I definitely wouldn't do that," Rina assured Lorraine.

"Seems so. Well, then you'll be able to get by, I think. But we've digressed quite a bit. We need to see your magic, Rina. You know the incantation now?"

"Yes...but I don't have much confidence it'll be substantial."

"It doesn't need to be. If anything, I'm starting to think that Rentt's demonstration was an example of what *not* to do. Are you confident you can trigger the spell?"

"That won't be a problem. While I've used mana primarily for enhancing my body and my weapon, I can still cast basic spells. Anything more than might come out a little *off*."

"How off?" Lorraine asked.

"I learned almost everything from my older brother, who's a knight. So while I'm good with enhancements related to swordplay, I didn't really learn any other magic?"

If I remembered correctly, Rina's older brother was Idoles Rogue, a knight of the First Brigade of the Kingdom of Yaaran. He was probably off working in the royal capital. I wondered how he and the rest of Rina's family would react. Obviously, it'd be a pretty big problem if they learned she was now a vampire. I decided I should check with her on that later.

"Mm, a knight. I don't know about the Yaaran knights, but most Imperial Knights can use at least mid-level spells. Well, if you can cast it, it shouldn't be a problem. Try it."

At Lorraine's urging, Rina stepped forward. Isaac and I watched from a short distance away. I didn't think something like what had happened with my spell would happen this time, but...I couldn't say it *definitely* wouldn't.

Rina began chanting the incantation. "Fire, use my mana as your fuel and manifest before me. Aliumage!" A thumb-sized jet of flame erupted from Rina's palm.

"It's normal," Lorraine remarked.

Isaac nodded and added, "Yes, very normal."

It wasn't a disappointment or anything, but my weird spell made Rina's spell seem anticlimactic. I felt a bit bad about that.

After the fire had burned out, Lorraine asked, "How did it feel when you tried using magic? Was there a difference from before?"

"It didn't feel as tiring as usual. I don't feel like I used any mana either."

"Hm, yes. For a novice, you've got a lot of mana. Of course, I don't know what's average for a lesser vampire. Isaac?" Lorraine turned to Isaac for confirmation.

"Let me see. It should feel like you could cast everyday magic without exhausting your mana. Since vampires also regenerate mana much more quickly, you're probably equal to a mid-level human mage."

"Lesser vampires are that powerful?" Rina said, a little surprised. "Mm. So those above them must be rather intimidating."

That might not have sounded like much, but mages possessed an incredible amount of firepower. With that level of mana and the training to make use of it, it'd be more than enough to earn a good living. Of course, it was wasted if you couldn't use magic.



"So, we've tested your physical strength and your mana. What else? Do you have anything to add, Rentt?" Lorraine asked me.

"Let's see. I guess because I gave Rina my blood, she's one of my familiars?"

"That would be true for a standard vampire," Lorraine said as she glanced at Isaac.

Although Lorraine knew a fair amount about vampires, since we had an actual vampire here, it would be easier just to ask him.

Isaac nodded. "Yes, I believe that would be the case. A vampire's familiar can break that bond if they become stronger than their master, but that's an exception. I don't think this is well known among humans, though." he said, looking at Lorraine.

Lorraine tilted her head. "That's the first I've heard of it. I suppose it's

because humans have no way of finding out. Is it a common occurrence?"

"Not particularly. It's an extremely difficult thing to achieve. If the familiar strengthens their own abilities, their master takes their mana and blood, so it's impossible for a familiar to achieve it through ordinary means. If the master wants their familiar to do so, however, then it would be possible. But vampires that can afford to do that would be extremely powerful. Just surpassing them in power would be difficult in and of itself."

"I see." Lorraine paused and then asked, "What did you mean by a master taking their mana and blood?"

"A master can forcefully take any blood or mana that a familiar obtains. It sounds as though masters treat ghouls and lesser vampires like slaves, but since the masters can also provide their familiars with mana or blood, it's not a one-way relationship. For example, say a master with multiple familiars has them gather blood, but the amount of blood that each was able to gather differed. In such cases, the master can gather all of the blood and distribute it equally among their familiars. It decreases the risks associated with a failed hunt."

It sounded like there were disadvantages to that too, but human blood was pretty hard to obtain. Since there were also vampire hunters, I'm sure there were plenty of cases where careful hunting resulted in failure.

"So can I do that too?" I asked Isaac.

"I cannot say either way. However, since you can consume blood and obtain familiars like a vampire, your familiar will probably require blood. Edel, the puchi suri does, yes? How have you handled that up to this point?"

I'd been giving Edel Lorraine's blood. But he was much smaller than me and didn't need all that much. He could last three days on a single drop.

After I explained that to Isaac, he replied, "It seems you don't need very much blood, which must be why Edel is the same way. That, or perhaps he's just taking blood from you without your knowledge."

Wait, what did he just say? Without my knowledge?

"What does that mean?" I asked.

“If the master hasn’t set any restrictions, a familiar can freely take blood and mana from them.”

Isaac was suggesting that Edel might be doing the same. Now that he mentioned it, I could think of a few examples. There were times when Edel had taken either my mana, my spirit, or my divinity without my permission. It must have been the same with blood. What was I, a supply cache? But if Edel could do it...

“Can you do it as well?” I asked Rina.

Rina used to be human, while Edel was a puchi suri, but they were still both familiars. It was probably safe to assume that Rina could do the same. Or rather, this was what I was trying to ask in the first place.

If Rina could borrow and use my mana like Edel, it would be pretty useful. It would boost her abilities too. After all, the most important thing with mana was the total amount available. Since I now had a fairly big reservoir of mana, it’d be beneficial if she could tap into it. Now that she was a monster, there was no telling who might try to attack her. Even though we weren’t technically vampires, just pseudo-vampires, and we *looked* human, there was no such thing as being too cautious.

“Hrrm. I don’t know. How do I even try?” Rina asked.

Edel, who had been sitting on my shoulder this whole time, suddenly hopped onto the top of Rina’s head and patted her forehead.

“Oh?! Ah, okay. I see. Like, this?”

Rina began talking to herself. Immediately after, I felt some of my mana leave my body.

“Looks like Rina’s mana has increased,” Lorraine murmured.

I looked at Rina. “Were you able to do it?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. Edel taught me how.”

Evidently, the moment Edel hopped onto her head, she could understand what he was trying to communicate. He’d then taught her how to pull mana from me. According to Rina, Edel’s advice was to just yank it from me without

hesitation. It didn't feel like she'd taken much, so I guess that was the right approach.

I checked with Edel when he returned to my shoulder, and he confirmed that he hadn't been able to draw much mana from me at first. But with a little practice, there was no real limit.

That sounded pretty dangerous. Edel responded to my thoughts by telling me I could restrict the flow, so I needed to learn to control that on my end.

Was this my test as their leader? My subordinates were a pompous rat and a young woman. That was kind of a weird combination.

Anyway, I wanted to see if Rina could pull more than just mana, and maybe use some divinity.



"Okay, so I know you can draw mana from me. But what about the other powers, spirit and divinity?"

Rina tilted her head. "I don't know about spirit, but maybe divinity? Hrm..."

Rina furrowed her brow and started to concentrate on something. After a moment, I felt divinity flow out of me and into her.

It still wasn't a large transfer, about the same amount I could use when I was alive. The most it could do then was purify water. That was extremely useful when adventuring, but it was pretty pathetic compared to the miracles that priests and saints could accomplish.

I got the impression that Isaac was keeping a bit of distance from Rina and me. Was that because he didn't like the sensation of divinity?

"Isaac, I guess divinity—"

Before I could finish, he turned to me with a sour expression on his face. "It's disagreeable. Unlike a minor monster, a little bit of cleansing won't do much to a vampire. But even then... How should I describe it? It feels like I'm being smothered by smoke."

"Well, I guess I see what you're trying to say. Definitely unpleasant."

Even if divinity didn't kill him, it was still uncomfortable to be around. Still, I wanted to test what Rina could do, so I needed him to bear it for the moment.

Isaac seemed to understand without me having to say it. "There's no need to hesitate on my account," he said. "At this distance, it doesn't bother me much."

Despite the fact that Isaac disliked the feel of divinity, Rina seemed completely fine. Perhaps she wasn't a typical vampire either.

"Can you manipulate the divinity?" I asked her. "As in, can you use it for cleansing or healing, or imbue it into your weapons and armor?"

Divinity was different from mana. You could intuitively use it even if you didn't understand its composition or its mechanics. However, Rina had borrowed my divinity rather than used her own. For most people, divinity was either a power they were born with or a direct blessing from a spirit or a god. Then again, since Edel could use it, there was a good chance that Rina could too.

"I think I can sort of grasp how to do it," Rina said. She looked around, as though she was unsure of what to target.

Lorraine added, "Just randomly use it. Like this." She aimed her divinity at the weeds growing at her feet.

Lorraine was now a follower of one of the gods—I think it was Viro or Gedo-something—and they had gifted her with divinity. Because that god wasn't particularly powerful, Lorraine didn't have a lot of it. Still, she was able to lightly cleanse and heal. From a religious organization's point of view, that made her a holy priestess. Well, there was nothing particularly holy about her. If anything, she was more of a witch.

The weeds that Lorraine had cleansed grew a few millimeters, and they looked healthier. Speaking as the resident walking fertilizer, Lorraine still had a lot to learn, but it was easy to see a god of plants had blessed her. She couldn't imbue objects with divinity, though. I was still kind of unique in that sense.

Rina watched Lorraine's demonstration and nodded. She directed the divinity at some nearby weeds. They also grew several millimeters and looked fresh as a daisy. But like with Lorraine, it didn't infuse any divinity into them.

I did the same, and the weeds grew a dozen centimeters. They also had a faint amount of divinity in them. Isaac wrinkled his nose as though he'd run into a particularly odiferous flower. He seemed to be struggling.

"Sorry. I guess I should take this home," I offered.

Isaac shrugged. "It's a small corner of the yard, and I believe my mistress would like to see it, so you can leave it." A dry laugh escaped his lips.

One of Laura's hobbies was collecting rare magic items. In a really broad sense, my holy weeds would qualify. Even if they technically didn't count, they'd still probably be useful for making magic items, so it made sense why she'd want them.

"I guess I'll leave them there, then. But if they end up being a problem, let me know. I'll come pick them up."

Isaac nodded.

We had determined that Rina could pull mana and divinity from me and use it, but evidently, she couldn't do the same with spirit.

"Is there no way for you to draw any spirit from me?" I asked her.

Rina furrowed her brow and tried several times, but nothing happened. "Doesn't look like I can," she said, her shoulders slumping in disappointment.

I had no idea why that might be, but Lorraine offered a theory. "This is just a hypothesis, but you ordinarily need training to use spirit, right? That's probably the difference. Rina already knew how to use mana, and divinity is intuitive to use, but that's not true of spirit."

That made sense. You couldn't use a power that you didn't know anything about. But in that case, did that mean that Edel already knew about spirit before we met? Edel was pretty tough for a puchi suri. It was possible he knew how to use it. Spirit was based on the life force of every living creature, so it would make sense that things other than humans could use it.

That probably meant that Rina just wasn't used to it yet. We could work on that. I could always teach her how to use it too.



“I think that’s everything. No, wait, there’s one more thing we need to test. There may not be any changes, but it’s worth checking,” Lorraine said. I tilted my head quizzically at her, and she sighed in exasperation. “Wings. Specifically, your wings. Since you’re much stronger now, you might very well launch yourself to the far side of the moon. We should test them in an open area first.”

I’d forgotten about my wings. There was a good chance I’d end up as one of those meatheads who crushed someone’s fingers with a simple handshake. If I imbued my wings with my increased mana and spirit, I might blast off to who knows where.

“All right,” I agreed. “Let’s give it a try. Oh, that reminds me. Vampires usually don’t have wings, right, Isaac?”

“No, they don’t. However, there are avians among the beast-folk, for example. When those sorts become a vampire’s familiar, they’re *technically* winged vampires.”

Well, they were a bit different from me, considering they already had wings before becoming a vampire. Of course, Isaac’s explanation begged the question of just where mine had come from. It seemed Isaac wasn’t sure either, so figuring that out would have to wait.

“Well, guess I’ll try it. Wings— Whoa.”

When I unfolded my wings, something much larger than I’d expected sprouted from my back. I didn’t remember them being *that* big. They had been, at most, a couple dozen centimeters. This time, they felt totally different. I hesitantly turned my head to check my back and found...

“They’re huge,” I remarked.

They were so large that a single wing was longer than I was tall. Not only that, but in the past, they had looked more or less like bat wings. Now they had scales of some sort on them. The membranes were red, but everything else was a dull green. They reminded me of—

“They look like dragon wings,” Lorraine interjected. “How fascinating. Why would they be growing from your back?”

She was right. Mine definitely looked like those of a dragon. Compared to a real dragon, they were still small and unimpressive, but they did look draconic.

“They look really cool! I wonder if I can grow them too,” Rina muttered from behind me.

Oh, right. We hadn’t checked that yet. There was a chance she could grow them too.

“Among the greater beast-folk, there are those called dragon-folk. I believe they have similar-looking wings,” Isaac said as he studied mine.

I knew dragon-folk existed, but I’d never encountered their race before. Maalt and the Kingdom of Yaaran itself were on the fringes of civilization, and the population here was predominantly human.

Compared to other races, humans were rather plain looking, without any real distinguishing characteristics, but they were also extremely adaptable and could live wherever they wanted. That combined with their ability to produce a large number of offspring was one of their strengths as a race. Other races tended to be very picky about where they lived, or they needed special environments to survive, so they weren’t able to spread across the world as easily as humans.

A good example of this would be the elves. They struggled outside of woodlands. They wouldn’t come down with “woodlands withdrawal” or something and die as a result, but they would fall into depression when they were away from the woods too long. It could chip away at their will to live. Apparently, in the long run, they could even die from it. There were elves who weren’t bothered by being away from woodlands, but they were a small minority.

This was why I’d never met any dragon-folk, though if I recalled correctly, they were extremely rare to begin with.

“Have you ever met any, Lorraine?” I asked. “Dragon-folk, I mean.”

She shook her head. “No, I haven’t. I’ve read that they’re special even among the beast-folk. That’s why they rarely show themselves to other races. Since the empire, while not explicitly human supremacists, tends to be pretty discriminatory, beast-folk in general don’t go there much in the first place.

Isaac, how about you?”

“Yes, several times, but it was quite a while ago. However, we didn’t sit and converse with them. It was more of a run-in. They were difficult opponents.”

Difficult opponents? It must not have been a peaceful encounter. Well, that did make sense. Isaac was a vampire. I’d imagine that most encounters ended up in bloodshed.

“Do you mind explaining why you fought them?” I asked.

“We were after the same thing they were, and it escalated into a conflict of ownership. During that fight, they sprouted wings like the ones on Rentt’s back. I’ve heard they’re extremely skilled wielders of spirit.”

Spirit wielders relied more on physical combat than magic. Most beastmen were like that, but a few races among them were good at magic, so it wasn’t always the case. That wasn’t all that important right now, though.

“I guess my wings resemble those of a dragon-folk. Would be nice to meet one and ask.”

If I could ask them directly, they could tell me either “Nope, not ours,” or maybe “Oh, hello fellow dragon-person!”

I hadn’t meant that seriously, but Isaac shook his head, his brows furrowed. “No, you should refrain from that. They’re a proud people. If your wings aren’t the same as theirs, they could interpret that as you mocking them by imitation and attack you. Besides, the fact that you’re a pseudo-vampire might also be a problem. Since they’re extremely proud of their own heritage, it’s not likely they’d forgive a vampire having one of their prized traits.”

That sounded a bit scary. Plus, it might be a problem if too many people saw my wings. I couldn’t casually use them on a whim. I’d never used them much before anyway, for that same reason, so I didn’t mind refraining. Still, they were a nice option in an emergency. I just needed to be careful.

“Then I guess I need to visit the God of Appraisal,” I concluded.

That was my only option to figure out my race and to evaluate this mask. Although, I was skeptical whether the God of Appraisal would directly do the

appraising.

“That would be the safest course of action,” Isaac confirmed. “For the moment, if we’re going to give your race a temporary name for convenience’s sake, I’d say you’re a vampire-dragon-folk. Not that such a race exists.”

Isaac had evidently gone with the easiest name for the time being. Maybe he had put some thought into it, but it was just a touch too literal. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it.



In the end, though we had tested all my physical changes, I wasn’t able to find out anything concrete about what I’d become. The most important thing, though, was having a good grasp of what I was capable of. Or at least, that’s what I told myself.

The next thing we needed to discuss was the city.

“Feels a little late to bring this up, but the dungeon’s expansion has stopped, right?” I asked Isaac.

“Yes. I believe it’s because Lady Laura is controlling it. There’s been no sign of any expansion since that incident. However...”

“However? What’s the issue?”

“Not so much an issue per se. It’s best that you see for yourself. At the very least, it’s not a particularly serious problem.”

“Well, if you say so.”

Lorraine noticed my skepticism and nodded at me to indicate that there was no immediate problem. I supposed that meant things were fine.

“What about reporting to the guild?” I added.

“We haven’t made any formal reports yet,” Isaac answered. “We thought it best to get our story straight first. In particular, we’d like to keep the fact that Lady Laura has become the dungeon master a secret.”

That would be important. If we mentioned anything about that, it might inadvertently reveal that Laura was a vampire. Laura and Isaac were familiar

with the concept of a dungeon core, but that knowledge wasn't widespread among humans. I hadn't known about them despite my long years as an adventurer, so I suspected that the guild was ignorant of them as well. However, if they did know at least something about them, if they knew a core's characteristics, they could guess that Laura was an unusual, remarkable figure of some sort.

In addition, Nive was still in Maalt. It was clear from our past dealings that she would obsessively hunt a vampire to the very ends of the world if she found out one was around.

"I agree. If people found out Laura is a vampire, then they would also suspect that we might be vampires as well. But what should we say in the report?" I murmured that last part with a sigh.

"You might be overthinking it," Lorraine offered. "After all, you told Wolf you were going after Shumini. The easiest thing would be to report that things settled down when you defeated him."

It was an extremely simple explanation, but it was the truth. Wolf probably wouldn't ask too many questions if I told him that we'd defeated Shumini and left out all the parts about the dungeon core and dungeon master. Laura had restored the city's peace by absorbing the core, but Wolf would assume it was because Shumini was dead. Things had returned to normal, so there wasn't much room for suspicion. However, the dungeon was still there under the city, and I was sure the guild would send in their own parties to investigate. However, Laura had the core, and she was its master. Examining the dungeon wouldn't reveal anything else.

"Yeah, let's go with that," I said, nodding. "Isaac, does that work for you as well?"

"That sounds fine. As for Miss Rina, perhaps note that you found her bound in a back room. You could report you found her by chance, but Miss Rina was there because Shumini had captured her, right?"

Isaac looked to Rina, and she replied, "That's right. I suddenly lost touch with my two party members, so I went to look for them. That's when he captured me. He then fed on my blood. By the time I realized what had happened, you

found me.”

So Shumini had captured Raiz and Lola first. I asked Rina for details, and she elaborated that they’d been using an inn as their home base. Neither had returned that night, so she had gone to look for them, only for Shumini to capture her and turn her into a vampire.

“In that case,” I said, “the inn you guys used is probably wondering why your party hasn’t returned. We can’t just leave out her capture. It’d be easier to say she had been captured but was okay.”

We could have noted that I ran into her by chance, but since there were people who knew she’d been missing for some time, it could turn into a problem. They could decide to check into that part of the city themselves. Constructing a lie that was as close to the truth as possible would work much better. It was true that she had been captured, and it perfectly explained her disappearance. We would just leave out that Rina had become a vampire and Laura had become the dungeon master.

“Very well. I’ll answer that way when someone asks me,” Rina said. “Although, I don’t know if anyone’s going to ask anything to begin with.”

That was probably true. It sounded harsh, but not many people would care if an adventurer went missing. At most, they’d assume that the adventurer had ended up dying somewhere and treat it as an everyday tragedy. As for the guild, unless it was someone extremely important or someone they needed for some special reason, they didn’t bother searching for missing adventurers. Rina wasn’t one they’d look for.

“But the circumstances this time are a little different,” I pointed out. “People turned into monsters, and a few adventurers turned into thralls. If an adventurer that has been missing for a while suddenly shows up again, they’ll at least ask some questions.”

They would carefully check to make sure that the adventurer wasn’t a monster or a thrall. It would be terrifying if there were vampires and thralls wandering around and working as adventurers. Admittedly, I’d been doing just that, and Rina would be doing the same from here on out.

“When you put it that way...” Rina paused for a moment and then said, “Yes,

you're right. I'll make sure I don't give anything away."

"Then I guess we should report to the guild. Our story will be the one we just discussed, and as for the details...we'll figure them out when we get there."

It would work out. I mean, there wasn't any real reason to be suspicious of us. Wolf had a knack for sniffing things out, though. I tried to convince myself that it would be fine.

Chapter 2: Vampire Hunters and Confirmation

Since Isaac had already agreed to teach us more vampiric skills, we decided it could wait until after we'd reported to the guild. Wolf would undoubtedly get restless if we waited too long.

Maalt had already returned to its daily routine, so perhaps this wasn't an urgent task, but I wanted to take care of it as soon as possible. We'd already gone over the potential holes in our story, so it would be fine. As for Isaac, we decided he wouldn't accompany us. Nive was probably still there, and she had an amazing talent for exposing vampires. The moment she ran into Isaac, she'd greet him with Holy Fire.

The same could be said for Rina, but like me, she wasn't particularly bothered by divinity. For ordinary vampires, divinity wasn't so bad that it would immediately vaporize them. They would recover from any injury it caused, but it would take longer, and they'd suffer light burns just from the contact. Since Rina hadn't had any effects of the sort from channeling divinity, it was likely that Nive's Holy Fire wouldn't expose her.

It'd be best if Nive didn't do that at all, but she wasn't the sort who'd listen even if I were to tell her not to. So long as we were in the city, we couldn't completely avoid randomly encountering her if she was still around. If that was the case, I needed to be with Rina when we saw her. Whatever ended up happening, we'd be in the situation together.

"All things considered, there's not as much disorder as I'd thought there'd be," I said as we headed to the guild.

After what had happened, I assumed that the city's residents would still be panicked or shocked. However, there was no sign of that, as far as I could see. Their expressions weren't particularly clouded, and they were behaving like they would after a regular natural disaster like an earthquake or hurricane. They were fixing the buildings and clearing away the debris the monsters, thralls, and adventurers had caused. There was something a little odd about it all.

“Speaking with the city’s people should clear it up for you,” Lorraine suggested.

Her statement had been ambiguous, but I decided to follow her advice and approach one of the passing residents.

“Ah, that. Something about a new dungeon under the city, right? But the monsters don’t come out all that often. Eh, chalk it up to bad luck.”

I asked another resident, and they answered, “Monsters? Sounds like some came flooding out of the dungeon. I know a few people who fell victim to them, but nothing to do about that. Besides, there’ll be aid payments coming from his lordship. That’ll be enough to fix up the shop, so no big deal.”

Yet another said, “The monsters got my husband. But he was fighting to protect us, I’m sure of it. I just gotta remember that and keep living, for his sake. Maaltesian women are tough.”

Everyone I asked made it clear that there had been plenty of damage to the city, but...

“None of them mentioned anything about the city’s people turning into monsters.”

When the dungeon appeared, it had turned a number of Maaltesians into monsters. The adventurers had had no choice but to kill them, but they had done so with pained expressions. Those were the facts. Yet no one from the city mentioned it. Was it just too tragic to talk about?

As I was going over the possibilities in my head, Lorraine added, “Well, that’s the long and short of it. It seems no one remembers that some of their fellow residents turned into monsters. They seem to think that the monsters came flooding out of the dungeon and killed those people.”

“But you and Rentt remember what happened, right?” Rina noted. “That’s so odd. Isaac also remembered.”

She had a point. Lorraine and I could perfectly recollect those events. And yet...

Lorraine continued, “Isaac believes that it’s due to Laura’s efforts as the

dungeon master. The residents could deal with the fact that monsters had attacked and they now had a dungeon under their city, but they couldn't accept that their own families and friends had turned into monsters and attacked them. So Laura made little alterations to their memories. Apparently, powerful dungeon masters can do that. It's actually a rather frightening revelation, but perhaps it's for the best this time."

Since Laura was still unconscious, we couldn't be certain, but Isaac had probably meant that it was the most likely possibility. I certainly couldn't think of anyone else who could perform such a feat. It was in character for her, considering how much she cared for the city's residents. If that was the case, I guessed it was fine. I mean, sure, it wasn't actually fine that a dungeon master could selectively alter people's memories. You didn't need to be a genius to know how impressive and frightening that was. But still, it was one of those things that didn't bear dwelling on.

Besides, what could we even do about it? Kill her? I couldn't bring myself to think of that. It was thanks to Laura that Maalt had survived relatively intact. Without her, the city would have ceased to exist, becoming just a giant dungeon. So long as she intended to protect Maalt, I thought it was okay to leave things as they were.

If someday Laura were to change her mind, I wouldn't face off against her. The only thing I'd be able to do was pray to the gods that such a situation would never occur. I couldn't even imagine how I'd beat her in battle. She was so much more powerful than any of us. Even if we all banded together and attacked at once, we wouldn't stand a chance.

"It's worth asking Laura what a dungeon master can do when she wakes up. Not that it would change anything," I said to Lorraine.

"It seems that dungeon masters are more powerful than I thought. Or is it something specific to Laura? Perhaps there are limits of some kind. That's something I'd like to ask her."

Laura had mentioned something about limitations, but we had no idea what those might actually be. A dungeon master's great power came at the cost of living with those constraints. But we would have to wait until Laura woke up to

find out what they were.

We continued our conversation until we arrived at the guild.



The guild was rather busy inside when we arrived. Well, of course it would be, considering what had happened. From paying out bounties for the thralls and the monsters to buying the magic crystals that came from those monsters, the guild had their hands full. The employees behind the counter were hurriedly completing their tasks, sorting through stacks of paper. With just a glance at their faces, you could see that the light had gone out of their eyes. Once this rush was over, they might very well stagger home, collapse into an exhausted stupor on the floor, and sleep for days.

In the middle of that chaos, I heard a voice behind me.

“Rentt! Lorraine and...Rina? I’m glad to see you’re okay.”

When I turned around, there stood Sheila, the guild receptionist who was well aware of our circumstances. Her eyes were dulled by exhaustion, and she looked like she would collapse from the fatigue that practically oozed from her pores.



“Seems you’ve got quite a mess on your hands, Sheila,” I said sympathetically.

Sheila shook her head. “Compared to everyone who actually fought the monsters, this is nothing. Though we could use a few more hands,” she murmured, her voice sounding thin and tired.

There wasn’t really anything I could do to help. It was all guild work, and given how busy they were, they were probably making a mint in the process.

Magic crystals from thralls fetched a good price at the market, and the various raw materials harvested from them were also in high demand. There were plenty of raw materials from the other monsters as well that could be used to rebuild the city, so business would be booming at the guild for the foreseeable future. Whether any of that would trickle down to the employees was a different question, a mystery only known to those higher up the chain and maybe the gods themselves. It was all up to Wolf.

“Good luck,” I said to Sheila. “While I’d like to celebrate that we were able to see each other again, we have some information that Wolf should hear about. Do you know where he might be?”

“Oh, that was part of why I came to talk to you. The guildmaster is in his office, so please make your way there.”

I nodded at Sheila and headed to Wolf’s office.



The moment I opened the office door, Wolf lifted his head and said, “So, you’ve finally decided to show your ugly mug.”

Though he only had his right eye, his gaze was as sharp as ever. However, it wasn’t intimidating in the least. I supposed that was because we’d already explained various things to him in the past and he considered us one of his flock. Even so, I couldn’t let my guard down. I still intended to leave out anything related to Laura in our report.

Wolf’s desk was piled so high with paperwork that I found myself impressed at the sheer height of the stack. I assumed it all needed the direct signature of the guildmaster. It was at that moment that I swore I would never become a

guildmaster myself.

“Yeah. You got a minute?” I asked. “I’ve come to report. You do look pretty busy, though.”

Our news wasn’t urgent, and if he wanted us to come back later, that wasn’t a problem. There didn’t seem to be any immediate threats to the city, so there wouldn’t be any harm if my report was a little late.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Wolf said, “No, this pile can wait. I’ll hear it now. You need to talk to me alone or...?”

His right eye turned toward Lorraine and Rina. It wasn’t that he wanted them gone, but he wanted to make sure it was fine if they listened in on a conversation where my secret might come to light. I’m sure he figured I’d explained some of it to Lorraine, but perhaps he assumed I hadn’t told Rina the whole story.

I shook my head. “No, it’s fine. They both *know*.”

I emphasized the last word, and Wolf’s single eye widened in surprise. “In that case, they’re free to stay. Make sure you close that door tight, lass,” he said to Rina since she’d entered last.

The door was still a bit ajar, so Rina hurriedly shut the door behind her.



Wolf cut directly to the chase. “So, can I assume the monster you mentioned during the whole ruckus is dead?”

“Yeah. We took care of him. Here’s the proof.”

I produced a magic crystal. Shumini had turned almost entirely to ash, but this one had been lying within it. Since Isaac had once been close to Shumini, I had offered it to him, but he’d pressed it back into my hands and told me that I’d need it for proof and he wouldn’t mind if I decided to sell it off after. Shumini was almost like a stalker to him, so he probably didn’t want any of his mementos. Or perhaps I was overthinking things.

Wolf took the magic crystal and said, “Well now. This one’s a big beaut. Ones this size don’t come around that often. Must’ve been a hell of an opponent.” He

sounded impressed.

While size wasn't always the deciding factor in price, a crystal as large as this one rarely appeared on the market. You could also tell that it was high quality based on the color, the clarity, and the amount of mana it contained. Measuring the specific amount of mana required a special tool designed for that purpose, but you could get a general sense of how much was inside after you'd handled a few.

As for the exact size, this one was about two classes bigger than the crystal I'd gotten from the giant skeleton. That one was equivalent to Gold-class, but it was safe to say Shumini's crystal was equivalent to Platinum-class. Still, given that a giant skeleton's crystal grew to that size by collecting and compressing mana over years, even decades, the fact that Shumini's had reached this size just hours after he'd become a monster was proof of just how powerful he had been. That, or the power that had created the dungeon was extraordinarily potent.

Either way, there was no question that this crystal would fetch a high price. Not that I'd brought it here to sell it, but since Isaac had given his blessing to do so...



“All right, let's start with the state of the city.”

Wolf began to explain what had happened after we defeated Shumini—more accurately, what had happened after we defeated Shumini and Laura took the dungeon core out of Rina.

“First, the thralls that were rampaging across the city suddenly became sluggish. It made it a lot easier to kill them. We should have gotten most of them. There might be a few stragglers hiding out, but they're not much of a risk now. According to Nive, when thralls lose whatever master is controlling them, their intelligence often plummets. I guess that's what happened when you finished off Shumini.”

Just as I'd expected, Nive was back in town. I'd seen her get as close as the city walls, so it wasn't exactly a stretch to assume she'd returned now that the barrier surrounding the city was gone.

“What’s Nive doing now?” I asked.

“She’s hunting down the last of the thralls. It’s good she’ll do the work without being asked, but she seemed in a bit of a mood. Something about there being no vampires.”

While thralls were vampires of sorts, Nive was presumably talking about lesser vampires and above. In particular, she meant Shumini’s class and above. She’d said she had a nose for that sort of thing, so she must have instinctively known Shumini was gone. Besides, the city no longer had the tension that had come with Shumini’s presence.

I felt like she’d blame me if I ran into her. I really hoped I wouldn’t meet her.

Wolf continued, “As for the rest, the monsters that appeared in the city, they suddenly disappeared. I’m guessing that was also because of Shumini’s death. It was a bit after the thralls had slowed down, but I can’t think of any other reason. Anything come to mind?”

I shook my head. “No, nothing in particular.”

I had told a white lie. That was triggered not by Shumini’s death, but by the dungeon core. When Laura removed the core from Rina and absorbed it herself, she had made the monsters disappear. It seemed the reason the city’s residents had turned into monsters in the first place was due to the dungeon, so I couldn’t think of any other reason they’d just vanish. Still, since revealing that would cause all sorts of problems, I wasn’t going to mention it.

“Got it. Anyway, the monsters are gone too. The city’s mostly returning to normal. There’s still some lingering damage to the buildings, and there are injured people to care for, but it looks like they’ve got a handle on it. The lord and the council have paid out relief funds, and as for the injured, the churches have sent some priests and priestesses. We’ve also sent out a few people from the guild. Maalt will be back to normal in no time.”

This recent incident had been fairly serious, but the fact that recovery wouldn’t take long was a testament to the residents’ tenacity. Well, that was part of it, but I was sure that Laura’s memory manipulation was the main reason. Even for people as hardy as Maaltesians, it would be hard to stay if you thought your neighbor might turn into a monster at any moment.

If it was just a random monster attack, that could happen anywhere in the world. It wasn't something you could avoid by moving away. That was why everyone was willing to band together and rally around the community, processing their grief and trying to move forward in spite of their struggles. There was also a dungeon under the city now.

Lorraine interjected, "Speaking of the city, about the situation underneath it..."

She wasn't calling it a "dungeon" because it would raise suspicions. While it seemed most of the city's residents already knew about its existence, there was no need for us to reveal that we also knew.

"Yep, we're looking into it now," Wolf answered. "Though everyone's pretty much concluded it's a dungeon. Monsters flooding out of it was what triggered this whole fracas, so everything falls into place if that assumption's right. We don't have a clue how one suddenly formed, but all the mechanics behind them are still just theories. Can't do anything about that. The current assumption is that Shumini started his activities in this city because he had some inkling that the dungeon was forming."

Wolf wasn't quite right, but he wasn't that far off either. The only reason they weren't considering the possibility that Shumini had created the dungeon was because no one believed that to be possible.

While the appearance of dungeons was a subject of considerable debate, most researchers concluded that they arose naturally. There were several dungeons that backed that theory too. However, based on Laura's explanation, there were many different types. That meant that some appeared naturally and some were artificially created. I'd need to talk to Laura, though, to get more detailed information.

"We've also confirmed that there are monsters wandering around inside it. But when we drove them to the entrance, they showed no signs of leaving. I'm told the monster flood was from the instability inherent in a newly manifested dungeon. You know anything about that?"

"Yes," Lorraine said, answering Wolf's question. "But there's not much more to say about it. While a dungeon is manifesting, its existence is unstable, so

various strange events occur in and around it. For example, if it manifests in a city, it may absorb part of the city and completely alter the architecture. If it manifests in a forest or mountain, it will transform the native fauna into monsters. A more unusual example would be— No, I digress. At any rate, I agree that the monsters in Maalt were part of that process.”

I wondered what her unusual example was. Maybe a dungeon had absorbed an entire city. Perhaps she was thinking about that ancient city we’d visited. Of course, that was another thing we couldn’t talk about. I felt like we were piling up secrets we couldn’t reveal to anyone.

It seemed Lorraine’s hesitation hadn’t triggered Wolf’s suspicion for the time being. It was common for her to ramble on about something then suddenly stop mid-sentence.

“Well, I guess that about covers it,” Wolf said. “I’m no scholar, so I don’t know or care about the specifics; I’ll leave that to the experts. But things in Maalt are going to start getting busy. After all, we’ve got a new dungeon.”



Why would a new dungeon add to the guild’s workload? For one, there would be an influx of new adventurers. Although dungeons were always generating new materials, there was a limit to the number they could produce. If there were too many adventurers working in the same area, the dungeon might run out of resources for them to gather. That said, it was almost unheard of for one to run out of monsters.

That wasn’t true for the various treasures scattered around the dungeon, however. It wasn’t as though they were easy to find, and the more adventurers there were in a dungeon, the lower your chances of finding anything. Adventurers generally earned their daily bread by hunting monsters and selling their magic crystals and raw materials, but those same adventurers also dreamed of striking it rich by finding a rare magic item and selling it on the market. It was extraordinarily rare to encounter something valuable enough to retire on, but just the hope of finding your fortune was one of the main motivators for adventurers. Obviously, the chances of discovering such treasure fell when throngs of adventurers swarmed a dungeon.

Not to mention, it would be extremely frustrating if a newcomer suddenly made a mint at a dungeon you'd been combing through for ages. In order to keep that sort of thing from happening, the guild usually surreptitiously adjusted the number of adventurers in any given dungeon. But because Maalt now had another dungeon, the city could handle a large influx of adventurers. The guild didn't have a good idea of its size yet, but depending on the scale, perhaps a few hundred adventurers would be moving to the city.

That was why Wolf had said he was going to be busy. Since a recently formed dungeon was uncharted territory with new treasures and monsters, it was best to hit it early. There would be an initial rush of adventurers, followed by a sharp drop and gradual rise to a steady population. The guild would probably only be busy for the first six months to a year, but still...

"Researchers and scholars will be among the newcomers," Lorraine noted. "We may be on the fringes of civilization, but newly formed dungeons are a rare phenomenon. I, too, want to do a thorough survey of it."

Lorraine's research focused on monsters and dungeons, so I could understand her desire. Plus, she was deeply involved with this dungeon's creation in a way that no ordinary scholar could have been, even if they had wanted to. No doubt she wanted to go down there, smack Laura out of her sleep, and pelt her with questions. Not that she could actually do that.

Wolf nodded at Lorraine. "Yeah, I'm sure there'll be folks like that coming. There's a prestigious Academy and Tower in the royal capital, meaning they'll be professors and mages from there. But they're usually sponsored by the state, and I'm sure they'll have knights and the like to protect them. The guild probably won't have much to do there. At least, that's my hunch. I intend to take steps, though, just in case I'm wrong."

The academy was an institution of higher learning operated by the kingdom. Yaaran's elite scholars and bureaucrats were among its alumni. All students learned magic, so it was sometimes called the Magic Academy, but its formal name was simply The Academy. Most of the student body was children of noble families and rich merchant houses, but gifted commoners were also allowed to attend. There were no real restrictions in terms of age, but most attendees were young people in their teens.

The Tower, on the other hand, was a research organization for mages. Its name differed depending on the country, and some countries had multiple, competing organizations. The mages in Yaaran were less particular, so The Tower here meant the one in the capital. While technically there were different divisions within its structure—such as research labs dedicated to investigating monsters, various branches of magic, and dungeons—they were all part of a single organization and were broadly referred to as “The Tower.”

In other countries, the empire in particular, the word “tower” referred to multiple and varied organizations, but...that didn’t really affect us.

“I’ve heard that people from The Academy and The Tower are all a bit eccentric,” I said. “I hope that nothing weird happens.”

Wolf furrowed his brow and frowned. “That’s my hope too. But if anything does happen, I’ll be counting on you to deal with it.”

His remark sent a shiver of dread up my spine. The people affiliated with The Academy or The Tower were either influential or had friends in high places. I’d prefer not to deal with them. Still, sometimes that couldn’t be avoided. Yaaran nobles were levelheaded on the whole, and as long as you went through the proper channels, they probably wouldn’t do anything too harsh to you. They weren’t anything to worry about. Or so I hoped.

“For my part, I hope you won’t need me,” I added.

“Oh c’mon now. You’re an employee, so you gotta put in *some* work. But anyway, that’s pretty much it. Anything else you wanted to discuss?”

I didn’t have anything, and it seemed Lorraine didn’t either.

Rina, on the other hand, asked, “Um, what happened to the adventurers they found in the New Moon Dungeon?”

Oh, right. What had happened to Raiz and Lola, the pair that had taken the Bronze-class Ascension Exam with me. They were now in a party with Rina. At the time, I was asleep and we hadn’t sorted out our story. We also had to check out Rina’s new abilities first, so she hadn’t been able to go back to the city yet. She still didn’t know what had happened to the two of them. When I saw them in the dungeon, I’d made sure to help them and double-check that they could

move around. I'd asked the veteran adventurers to take them to the city, so they should be somewhere in Maalt.

Wolf, as befitting of a guildmaster, understood immediately. "Ah, them. You're Rina, right? You wanna know how your party members Raiz and Lola are doing, yeah?"

The precision with which he had responded was impressive. He'd even learned all the newbie parties. Since such parties could easily die, most guildmasters only had a general idea of the rookie parties in their city. Just based on his knowledge of the city's adventurers, Wolf was a unique and admirable guildmaster.

When Rina nodded, Wolf replied, "Those found at the New Moon Dungeon were sent to guild-operated clinics for treatment, so... One sec, lemme find the list. Here we go. They're at the Kohm Clinic. Here's the location," he said, pointing out the clinic on a map.



We decided to head to the Kohm Clinic. When I found Raiz and Lola in the dungeon, I hadn't gotten the impression that they were badly injured, but they were severely weakened. While healing magic and divinity could heal wounds, they couldn't fix hunger or exhaustion. The only way to recover from those was food and rest.

No matter how much healing you received, if your body was at its limit, you would still die. Or at least, it was a distinct possibility. That was why it was useless to use a healing spell on someone dying of old age. Since we didn't know the details of their condition, we were still concerned about Raiz and Lola.

"This is it, right?" Rina asked.

We had arrived at the Kohm Clinic. It was about ten minutes away from the guild on foot and located a bit off the city's main street, so it was a little removed from the hustle and bustle of the city center. Since the clinic was for the sick and injured, they probably needed it to be relatively peaceful and quiet. But because it usually treated a fairly large number of patients each day, it was still close to the city's main streets in case they suddenly needed supplies.

Say an adventurer had been poisoned by a monster with an unusual type of venom. While healing spells could handle a fair number of those cases, sometimes they required a skilled herbalist. However, herbalists used raw materials to create their treatments, and a clinic could only keep so much in storage. When they needed a rare ingredient not stored on-site, quick access to the main market district was necessary. It was good to have stores nearby that could supply rare materials in an emergency.

The Kohm Clinic was a single-story building that looked a bit flatter than the ones surrounding it. Most of the buildings were at least two stories, but a few were three. It looked as if the clinic hadn't used their lot space effectively, but it was likely out of consideration for the patients. Most wouldn't be able to climb stairs. They could install a magic elevator, like a certain merchant house, but those were extremely rare and expensive. Even if it was a guild-sponsored clinic, that kind of equipment was still out of reach. All in all, this sort of construction was ideal.

"So, shall we— What?!"

As I was about to step into the clinic, I turned to speak to Lorraine and Rina behind me, when I noticed that Rina was on fire. The fire wasn't consuming her with the usual red flames; it was more like a blue-white flame was gently enveloping her, like an aura. Rina was evidently unaware she was on fire, and she cocked her head as I stared wide-eyed at her.

Did that mean Rina couldn't see it? That alone told me what was going on. They weren't ordinary flames. It was Holy fire. And there was only one person in all of Maalt who could wield it.

Lorraine could also see the flames, and she glanced at me and sighed in exasperation. It was clear we'd reached the same conclusion.

As we glanced around, a disappointed voice said, "Huh?! How odd! You're not a vampire?"

A gray-haired, red-eyed vampire hunter armed to the nines stepped out from behind a corner and walked toward us. It was Nive Maris. She'd obviously survived the battle intact because there were no signs of any injuries on her body.



“That’s a hell of a greeting, Nive,” I said. “Couldn’t you have at least said ‘hi’ before you tried that?”

Nive had been checking for vampires using Holy Fire. As I’d expected, Rina didn’t seem affected by it, but it was still shocking to see one of my companions suddenly burst into blue-white flames.

I told Nive to warn me first, but she shook her head and nonchalantly replied, “If I did that, the vampire would run away. I had no choice. I know, it’s rude to do that out of the blue. But when it comes to risk versus manners, well...”

I understood what she was saying, but I was still irritated. I couldn’t tell if it was because she’d suspected us or because I felt a little guilty that we were, in fact, some sort of pseudo-vampire monster. Considering humanity’s best interests as a whole, I had to admit that Nive had a point. However...

“I get what you’re trying to say. But why are you here anyway? Speaking of which, it’s odd to see you without Myullias.”

Nive didn’t have a single wound on her, so what was she doing at a healing clinic? As for Myullias, I’d always figured they came as a set.

“In spite of everything, Lady Myullias is still a saint,” Nive said. “She’s currently at the Church of Lobelia here, giving a sermon to provide comfort for the people affected by the recent incident. Also, since she’s *technically* a saint, she’s acting the part, healing and cleansing and the like. I’m afraid we might be in for a sudden rain.”

Nive had made sure to include little barbs like “technically a saint” and the quip about the rain—the sort of things that would have set off Myullias if she was here—but I had to admit she had a point. I’d never actually seen Myullias act like a saint all that much. I figured she’d blow up at me if I ever said that to her, though.

“And, why are you here?” I asked again. “You haven’t explained that.”

“Ah, beg your pardon. There are adventurers here who were captured by vampires, right? I came to check if they are still enthralled by the vampire. If you recall, I was a bit too busy to check at the time. Besides, sometimes they might look fine at a glance, but they end up enthralled after. That’s why I’m

here.”



Nive hadn't said anything outrageous, and there were stories of people destroying their own village even after the vampire horde was gone. The vampire hunters had failed to check if any of the villagers had been turned into vampires. It was important to confirm that the supposed victims weren't secretly enthralled. Still...

“Could you turn that off now?” I asked Nive as I watched Rina.

With a note of surprise, Nive said, “Oh, that's right. I didn't think it would be a problem if she couldn't see it, so I let it slip my mind. My apologies.”

Nive raised her palm and made a smothering motion. The blue-white flames surrounding Rina slowly shrank until they went out with a puffing noise.

Though she couldn't see the flames, Rina heard them go out. “Wh-What was that?! What *was* that!” She said, slightly panicking.

It seemed the Holy Fire hadn't really affected her, so I guessed it was fine.

“So what made you suspect Rina?” Lorraine asked Nive.

“Because she's with Rentt, of course. I jest! Don't glare at me like that. I heard Rina was with you when you came out of the new dungeon, so I figured you'd rescued her *after* the vampire had abducted her. I felt I needed to set fire to anything suspicious. It's an occupational hazard, I'm afraid.”

Nive really did have a sharp nose for this sort of thing. Or maybe she just had a remarkable information network. It might be that she'd just happened to hear rumors, but Nive still had this aura of wanting to pry into our business. I suspected that either adventurers or some residents that had seen us leave the house in question had said something. Given that four of us went in but five emerged, I guessed that suspicion had been warranted. Still, most people would have dismissed it as a mild oddity.

Nive's head, however, was wired to think, “Oh, hey, that might be a vampire.” There was a part of me that wished her thought process was more normal, but since her hunches were stunningly accurate, I couldn't really complain.

There was also a part of me that wanted to smugly declare that two of us were actually vampires. There was no way I could say that, though. They'd probably try to kill me—"they" being Nive, Laura, and Isaac. If I was being honest, it frightened me that I didn't stand a chance against any of them in a fight.

I had figured that I'd improved a little bit, but everyone around me was still stronger, including Lorraine. While her physical abilities weren't anywhere near my level, with her pure firepower as a mage and her ability to protect herself with spells like a shield, she was much stronger. I was pretty sure she could beat me without suffering a scratch. I supposed the path to becoming a great adventurer was still a long, uphill slog for me.

"In that case, can we consider your suspicions allayed?" I asked Nive. If she made that declaration here, it would prevent problems later.

"Oh, yes. No problem at all. My apologies, Miss Rina. Would you like me to pay restitution? When I tried it with Rentt, I paid him twenty platinum pieces."

"T-Twenty platinum pieces?! That's... What?"

Rina looked at me as though I were some sort of robber or scam artist, but I hadn't asked for that.

"Rina, just so we're clear, I never demanded that amount. Nive just kept piling up the coins."

She had increased the number so quickly that it'd felt like she was literally trying to drown me in a sea of coins. Technically, she had been buying the tarasque materials from me, so it wasn't like she had just given me the coins. Even so, it was a ridiculous sum.

"Will you be seeking payment, Miss Rina?" Nive asked.

Rina shook her head. "N-No. I mean, did you do something to me that requires restitution?"

Oh, right. I hadn't explained it to Rina yet. That was all Nive's fault, so I looked intently at Nive. Incidentally, I couldn't help but think she was exceedingly beautiful. Did she really need that beauty? It was a mystery.

Finally, Nive let out a sigh as though she had lost the staring contest. “Without getting into the specifics, I tested to see if you had become a vampire, Miss Rina.”

“Oh. I gathered as much based on the conversation, but how? I didn’t feel anything.”

“Simply put, I set you on fire. Like this.”

Nive directed a stream of Holy Fire at me. She did it slow enough that I could avoid it if I wanted to, probably because I’d complained about her springing it out of nowhere. I supposed that in her book, it wasn’t “out of nowhere” if it was slow enough that I could avoid it. That was some messed-up logic. Well, the Holy Fire wasn’t going to do anything to me anyway, so it wasn’t a problem if it hit me.

The Holy Fire struck and enveloped me, as though my entire body was on fire.

Rina began to shout, “Y-Y-You’re on fire! Water! We need water!”

“No, it’s not hot at all, so it’s fine. I mean, you were like this until a little while ago.”

“Huh?! Whaaat?!”

“This is a special flame created with divinity,” Nive explained. “Ordinary people won’t suffer any injuries or burns from touching it. However, vampires find the heat unbearable, and it burns them as well. Unless they’re extremely weak vampires, they won’t die from these flames, but... That’s not important. The point is that by setting someone on fire with this, I can tell at a glance if they’re a vampire.”

“At a glance? Ah...”

Rina looked like she wanted to comment about that part. I understood what she wanted to say, that there was a vampire-ish person here. She may have even wanted to add that she was the same way. But there was no way she could say that, so she half-heartedly said, “I see,” as though reading from a cue card.

At least put more effort into it! I thought.



“Raiz, Lola! Are you all right?!”

Once we entered the clinic, a worker had shown us to one of the treatment wards. The moment Rina caught sight of the two, she had called to them as she ran over. I wondered for a moment if she was being too loud, worried that it would bother the other patients, but while there were several beds in the ward, only two were occupied.

“Oh, Rina!” Raiz exclaimed. “We’re fine, but we were worried about you when we lost touch.”

“Where have you been?! I was worried we’d caused you some trouble by suddenly disappearing,” Lola added.



Vampires had abducted them while they were separated from Rina, so they didn't know that she had also been kidnapped and had been in much greater danger than either of them.

"That's my line! But I'm glad you're all right. The reason you couldn't reach me was because the vampire had also abducted me. These two, Rentt and Miss Lorraine, rescued me."

Nive hadn't been present when we rescued Rina, so she wasn't part of the introduction. Of course, there were two more people who had been part of that rescue, but since they weren't here, Rina must have decided to gloss it over for the time being. She'd probably also considered that it would be troublesome if Nive started prying into the details. At the very least, I was sure Rina had realized that Nive was a vampire's worst enemy. The problem was that Rina wasn't a particularly good actor. But since she wasn't actually acting at the moment, hopefully it would be fine.

"Rentt? Oh! Rentt! You rescued Rina?" Raiz asked.

"Rentt, thank you so much," Lola added. "Not only did you save us, but you saved Rina too."

They were surprised to see me here, but they weren't particularly surprised that I had rescued Rina. They knew I'd been going around dealing with the vampires. I couldn't take too much credit, though. Nive had done the most during that fight. As for Rina, her rescue was due to the efforts of people other than me.

"It just happened that way, and I didn't really do all that much," I said. "No need to thank me. At any rate, I'm glad all three of you are okay. So, do you remember Lorraine? She was there when we rescued you two. She's my...friend. Hope you'll get along with her."

Lorraine stepped forward. "I'm Lorraine. I didn't have time to introduce myself in the New Moon Dungeon, but I've heard plenty about the two of you from Rentt. As for me, I am a scholar and a mage. I'm also a Silver-class adventurer. It's a pleasure to meet you." She then offered her hand to them.

Raiz stared at Lorraine, his eyes wide at the revelation that she was a Silver-

class adventurer. Lola, however, examined Lorraine's face and body before glancing down at her own. I had a pretty good idea of what she was thinking.

"Oh, a mage? A Silver-class one at that? Wow! Um, I'd like to be a Silver-class adventurer someday! I'm still Bronze-class, but...do you have any advice on how to reach Silver-class faster?!"

Raiz was clearly acting differently from how he was with me, and as he shook Lorraine's hand, he spoke to her respectfully. It was basically hero worship. Was I that lacking in gravitas? I wore a strange mask and a shady-looking robe... Yeah, I didn't have any. I just looked creepy.

Lorraine gently smiled at Raiz as she turned to shake Lola's hand. "I'm afraid I don't have much advice on that matter. I didn't reach Silver-class from any effort on my part. I just happened to qualify for it while I was pursuing my studies. I had my abilities tested, but that's about all. If you want to learn how to become a Silver-class adventurer or greater, then I believe she would be a better teacher."

Lorraine gestured to Nive, who had been watching Raiz and Lola from the back of the room.

While a part of me felt it was out of character for Nive to be so reserved and tactful, it was natural given what she was here for. She was probably trying to observe Raiz and Lola without their knowledge. Nive was a stalker's stalker, the sort who had closely examined me without my knowledge. She would get mad if I said that, though.

While my impression of Nive was that she was rather high-strung when it came to vampires, she was calm and forgiving in every other situation. For that reason, despite all the things I disliked about her, I still couldn't bring myself to drive her off.

"Yes, yes, a pleasure to meet you for the first time," Nive said. "Well, not exactly. But since this is our first proper introduction, I'm Nive Maris. I'm an adventurer, and despite appearances, I'm Gold-class. I'm pleased to meet you both."

Nive had sounded playful, but her smile didn't reach her eyes. That would be hard to see, though, unless you'd been through a fair number of deadly

situations. But she was quite good at hiding her intentions. As proof, neither Raiz nor Lola seemed to suspect anything about her. Raiz was even more excited at hearing “Gold-class,” while Lola appeared to have taken Nive’s excessive beauty as another blow to her self-confidence.

At the very least, they recognized her from the dungeon. That made sense. It was no exaggeration to say that Nive had saved both of them. But since her current demeanor was so much different from when she was fighting vampires, it took them a moment to realize she was the same person.

“Are you the one who was fighting those two vampires?” Raiz asked. “Also, Gold-class?! Holy... At your age?! And you’re a girl to boot!”

Raiz’s comment might have seemed sexist, but he hadn’t meant it that way. Physical strength was important for an adventurer. Even though spells and spirit techniques could enhance your physical abilities, in terms of base strength, men were stronger than women. That was why there were more men than women in the upper ranks of the adventuring community. At least in the guild, female adventurers were often viewed as a class below male adventurers.

In reality, it wasn’t unusual to see a male adventurer get his ass kicked because he had underestimated an accomplished female adventurer. Smart or even just experienced adventurers never judged one another by their gender. However, rookies generally operated based on the social views they’d picked up before becoming adventurers. Their assumption that women were physically weaker than men often held them back. Until they learned to discard their prejudices, they would make a myriad of mistakes.

I didn’t think Raiz fit into either category. He had probably just been looking for a way to compliment Nive for her accomplishments. Besides, he was the only man in his party. He wouldn’t be in a party of mostly women if he felt they were somehow inferior as adventurers.

“I can’t say I’m all that young,” Nive replied, “but I did put in a lot of effort. I worked for a long time as a vampire hunter and steadily built my abilities up through experience.”



“Yeah. Hunting vampires doesn’t sound easy,” Raiz murmured to himself. His

shoulders slumped.

His reaction was easy to understand. Asking freshly promoted Bronze-class adventurers to hunt vampires was almost as bad as asking them to hunt dragons. Both options were far out of reach. While my standards had been skewed because Nive made it look effortless, vampire hunting was a dangerous job that even high-class adventurers approached with caution. It wasn't something an ordinary adventurer could casually take on.

Moreover, vampires were extremely good at hiding their existence, and it was basically impossible to find them once they lost themselves in a crowd. Even if you could engage them in a fight, a lesser vampire was at least equal to an average Silver-class adventurer. Plus, they could constantly create thralls if left to their own devices. Assuming you were lucky enough to find one, they could reduce a village or city to a chaotic hellscape if you didn't approach them with the right tactics. They were a devilishly difficult target, so it wasn't something that lower-class adventurers could hunt on a whim.

Nive was only able to do it because she had the ability to spot vampires. Also, she understood vampires better than any other living person. She had a terrier-like tenacity and an analytical mind to support her obsessive hunt. Few rookie adventurers had that combination of traits, hence Raiz's disappointment.

"Raiz, it's not like you have to rush and put yourself in too much danger," Lola said, reassuring him. "We should just be patient and climb up one step at a time. Remember what Rentt told us?"

Had I actually said that? I might have said something during a casual conversation, but I didn't remember it. If I had, I wouldn't have said it offhandedly. I really did feel that way. After all, I had spent ten years slowly but steadily working my way up.

Even though I'd gotten stronger thanks to some weird, unique events, consistent effort was the most efficient way to improve. It would be different if you had some extraordinary talent or ability, but if you were vaguely expecting talent to give you a boost, you might very well end your career without getting to where you wanted to be.

"Hrm, a good observation. I agree completely, Rentt," Nive said, unexpectedly

praising me. “Of course, if you can hunt vampires, you’d be doing something great for the world and for humanity as a whole. But vampires are my prey, so perhaps it’s better you gain experience in a different way. Find work that is suited to your skill level and steadily complete those jobs. Rinse and repeat. It’s certainly lacking in flair, but it’s the best way to become a well-rounded, skilled adventurer. The greatest obstacle for a new adventurer is meaningless confidence and a desire for fame. The greatest priority is to overcome those things.”

Nive had offered some really solid advice. I was used to her acting like she had a few screws loose. I could tell Lorraine was thinking something similar based on her expression as she studied Nive. At the same time, there was also a hint of admiration, as though Lorraine was impressed that Nive was a proper high-ranking adventurer.

Raiz and Lola seemed deeply moved by Nive’s words.

“I see. So what Rentt said was true. Let’s put in the work and keep trying, Lola.”

“Mm-hmm. Don’t push yourself too hard.”

Lola was looking at Nive as if she was grateful for what Nive had said. I guessed Raiz tended to push himself too far. Lola must have been relieved to hear advice that might curb the worst of Raiz’s impulsiveness.

Nive continued, “Which brings me to my point. I want you two to continue growing as the next generation of adventurers. However, there’s something I want to confirm.”

Nive was about to explain what she was going to do. That was unexpected. Perhaps it was because the two seemed oblivious, at best. There was a possibility that they would become vampires in time, but right now you couldn’t tell. Neither of them realized that they could end up becoming vampires. If they had become vampires and were aware of it, they would have fled. But since they had no idea... Well, at least Nive was consistent.

“Confirm? What would you like to confirm?” Raiz asked.

“That you two haven’t turned into vampires. You were abducted by vampires,

right? There is a slight chance that you were enthralled in the process. I would like to remove any doubt.”

Nive was smiling, and just based on appearances, she was being polite. However, the emotions reflected in her red irises were anything but.

I wouldn't want to be the subject of that gaze, but it seemed Raiz and Lola couldn't sense anything amiss. That was a good thing. They would want to run away if they could feel Nive's veiled hostility.

Neither Raiz nor Lola was aware of the weight of their situation, and they exchanged glances before responding without artifice.

“That's fine. Lola's fine with it too, right?”

“Yeah. So long as it doesn't hurt.”

Nive held out her palm and summoned a blue-white flame. “It won't hurt if there's no problem. Since you've agreed, pardon me.”

A fireball about the size of a human head danced atop her palm. Raiz and Lola looked curiously at Nive as she turned her palm upward. The blue-white flames engulfed them, as though to consume them, but neither reacted. They felt something was perhaps different and they tilted their heads quizzically, but that was the extent of it. They weren't in any pain nor were they burning, so everything was fine.

Nive looked a tad crestfallen, but it seemed she had thought the possibility was low to begin with. She nodded, then turned her palm toward the pair again, motioning with her hand to snuff out the flames. The flames let out a soft sizzling noise as they died down.

“Thank you very much,” Nive said to Raiz and Lola. “There were no particular issues. You two should be free from any additional vampiric influence.” She gave them a gentle, serene smile.



“You don't have to look so disappointed,” I said to Nive.

She turned to me and shrugged. “I live to hunt vampires, you know. Of course, I'd be upset if I thought I was about to kill some, only to end up with

nothing. Not that I want people to turn into vampires. Better that they don't, really."

Nive's last remark was surprisingly rational. I couldn't help but think that she wasn't as bad as people made her out to be. It was just that she had an abnormal obsession with killing vampires.

Currently, Nive, Lorraine, and I were outside of Raiz and Lola's room at the clinic. Rina was inside with her party members. We'd figured that they had a lot to catch up on, so we had stepped outside. They also had to discuss what they were going to do from here on out. Having outsiders there would make things a little awkward.

Lorraine and I wondered if they'd address Rina's current state. I knew Raiz and Lola's personalities pretty well from my interactions with them during the Bronze-class Ascension Exam, but even then, I assumed that Rina would omit that she was now a monster. It might be okay to let them in on the secret at some point. But at the moment, it was just too heavy a burden to place on a pair of Bronze-class adventurers.

Raiz and Lola were also young enough that I'd rather they still enjoy adventuring. Perhaps it would be best to wait until they were as jaded as I was. No, that might actually be worse. They could leak the information to someone for money. At least that was what I would do.

"Oh, speaking of vampires," Lorraine interjected, addressing Nive, "did you kill the one you ran into in the New Moon Dungeon?"

Oh yeah, we hadn't bothered to ask Nive about that.

"Yes, I made sure to kill it. Since I wanted to ask it a lot of questions, I stopped my attacks while it could still answer, but I have to hand it to the enemy. It chose death instead and turned itself into ash. Basically, I couldn't get anything out of it. Unfortunate. That was why I'd set my hopes on the boss in Maalt, but that wall... It was a terrible disappointment." Her shoulders slumped in a rare display of sadness.

I could understand how that'd be awful for someone in Nive's position. She'd spent a lot of time and money preparing for the vampire's appearance, only for us to take the kill in the end. I doubted that Nive cared too much about the

credit, but since she so badly wanted to kill vampires, it might as well have been the same thing.

“I can only apologize on that one. We didn’t find out much either,” I replied.

That wasn’t actually a lie. We knew that Shumini had created a dungeon and tried to become its dungeon master, but we didn’t know why he had gone to the trouble of doing so. Was there some special benefit to being a dungeon master? Or was there some other reason? There was no way to know. We could ask Laura, but she was currently getting her beauty rest. We had no idea when she’d wake up. Noble ladies, after all, valued their sleep.

“No, it’s not your fault, Rentt,” Nive said, shaking her head. “I simply misjudged the situation. I should have left the New Moon Dungeon as it was and headed straight to Maalt. However, if I had, adventurers like Raiz and Lola would have ended up as victims. I didn’t get to kill the boss vampire, but you got him in the end, Rentt. It was probably for the best too, so I don’t have any complaints in that regard. But I do regret not getting to kill them myself.”

“Perhaps next time,” I said. “Though I hope there isn’t a next time.”

I’d said it jokingly, but Nive nodded seriously and added, “Yes, no one should be dragged into a vampire’s machinations a second time. This city should be fine for a while, however.”

I wondered how she could be so sure of that. I tilted my head quizzically at her.

Nive picked up on my skepticism and explained, “It’s one thing if it’s just a middle vampire, but when a greater vampire dies somewhere, other vampires tend to avoid that location. No doubt they have some sort of communication network. Ordinarily, you’d think they’d want revenge on the humans who killed their kin, but they’re more intelligent than that. That’s part of what makes them such difficult prey. And it’s also why they’ve been able to lurk in the darkness for as long as they have and survive. So, for the moment anyway, this city is safe.”

So that was what she’d meant. Shumini had been a greater vampire, so if Nive was right, vampires wouldn’t return to Maalt anytime soon. Still, it was worth being cautious. But Wolf could handle those details, so it wasn’t something I

needed to worry about.

“Does that mean you’ll be leaving Maalt, Nive?” I asked.

She basically lived to kill vampires, so I’d assumed that she wouldn’t stick around when there was little chance of running into one. I wasn’t implying that I wanted her out of the city...not really.

Aside from the vampire obsession, Nive was an extremely capable adventurer. I felt guilty for hiding things from her. It would be better if she were gone, but that was just because of my personal circumstances. For the Maaltesians, Nive was useful to have around.

However, Nive replied, “I think it’s time to leave. I’m intrigued by the new dungeon, but most questions about such things go unanswered. I’m no expert, and it’s not as though investigating it will tell me any more about vampires. I intend to quietly leave the city before the people from The Academy and The Tower start flooding in.”



“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said. “I was hoping you’d stay for a while longer and make a name for yourself here in Maalt.”

When I said that, Nive gazed intently into my eyes, sighed, and shrugged. “It’s not a total lie, but it’s not what you’re really feeling, Rentt. But that’s fine. I’m a busy woman. There are still many vampires to kill. Don’t miss me too much when I leave. Though, I suppose things will be different if you’re actually a vampire...”

Nive stepped closer to me, stopping with her face just inches from mine, and shook her head. “It really is strange. Why aren’t you a vampire, Rentt?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Exactly what it sounds like. I know we settled this a long time ago, but I was convinced you were one, Rentt.”

“That was because of my suspicious activities and stuff, wasn’t it?”

“That was part of it. But in the end, it was intuition. Not reason, not Holy Fire, but my intuition. It’s never failed me before. Until I met you, that is. That’s why,

Rentt, I've still got my eye on you."

She began to move even closer. The clinic room door clicked open, and Rina poked her head out. She looked at Nive and me. Time stopped for a moment.



“Huh? Rentt, you and Miss Nive are...*involved*?! M-M-Miss Lorraine! Are you okay with that?!” Rina said with a shout. She grabbed Lorraine by the shoulders and began shaking her back and forth.

Lorraine’s expression was difficult to describe as she let Rina shake her. “Fine, or not...I don’t think...it’s what you think...It is...”

“Then what is it?! What else would a man and woman do that close together?! Other than, you know, K-K-Ki—”

“Kiki?”

“K-Kissing...for example...”

“Hmm. I don’t know. Will they? Rina, let’s see if they will,” Lorraine said teasingly.

Nive turned to me. “Mm, shall we, Rentt? I certainly don’t mind.”

“But I would. Step back, please.”

I took Nive by the shoulders and pushed her away. I didn’t know if she’d been kidding or not, but she’d puckered her lips a little, which was all the more unnerving. I felt like if she did kiss me, she’d suck all the life out of me. Seriously. I mean, I should be the one doing the sucking, but... I can’t even imagine doing that to her.

For whatever reason, Rina looked disappointed, while Lorraine chuckled.

“C’mon, don’t do this to me, Lorraine,” I begged.

She quipped back, “Oh, but it was entertaining. Rina knows more about these things than I expected. Were you disappointed?” she asked Rina.

Rina blushed and stammered out, “N-N-Nothing like that! Um, so you two...aren’t in a relationship like that?”

Considering that Rina was still pursuing that question, she really did know more about the subject than I’d given her credit for. That or she was just really curious.

“It certainly wouldn’t bother me if we were,” Nive purred.

“Please stop. It’s hard to tell when you’re kidding, and that scares the hell out

of me.”

“You really can’t take a joke, can you, Rentt?” Nive said, shaking her head. “I’ll stop now. There are too many people who’d be mad at me if I pushed it any further. Miss Rina, you just happened to catch us at a moment when I moved closer to him. There’s nothing else to it.”

“Oh, I see...”

Again, I wondered why Rina was so disappointed. If Nive and I were ever in that sort of relationship, conflicting emotions would be the least of our problems. We were simply too different. At least, that’s what I felt. I couldn’t really say with any specificity, though. Let’s just call it my intuition.

“Besides, if we were in that sort of relationship,” Nive continued, “we wouldn’t do it in public. We’d do it quietly and in private. Even kissing in front of Miss Lorraine would be pushing it.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Though I’ve heard some people like that sort of thing,” Rina mused.

“Miss Rina, you aren’t just playing dumb, are you? I’m starting to suspect that’s the case here.”

“No, no, no! That’s not true! At all!”

I supposed Nive and Rina had compatible personalities because they were getting along well right now. Was it just me, or was Nive actually on the defensive here? That was unexpected.

Leaving the two to their banter, Lorraine walked over to me. “And what did you *actually* feel? She might be a crazy, obsessed vampire hunter, but she’s a world-class beauty. You sure you weren’t happy her face was so close to yours?”

Lorraine had been joking, but I immediately shook my head. “If anything, it felt like a dragon approaching me for a breath attack.”

“Oh, ah, my condolences.”

“Besides, I don’t feel much in that department these days. I won’t say at all, though.”

We exchanged words in a quiet whisper. However, we made sure to keep it vague enough that it wouldn't matter if Nive heard us.

"Ah, yes, that's true," Lorraine agreed. "How interesting that Rina was so fascinated by the subject."

Lorraine had a good point. Since Rina was a pseudo-vampire like me, I'd assumed that her various emotions and desires would be more muted. Was it because she had just become a vampire? Or was it because Shumini had tried to turn her with the express intent of making her his companion? In my case, I'd started out as a skeleton. Perhaps my feelings were less intense because I'd been cut off from all my living desires and was still dealing with the aftereffects. If so, those various desires might come back eventually, even if somewhat muted.

"Maybe she's just at that age," Lorraine suggested. "Her friends are 'more than friends, less than lovers' too, remember?"

"Raiz and Lola? I see."

As we continued our discussion, Nive and Rina finished their conversation.

"Well then, I shall take my leave. I'll be setting off from the city tomorrow, so you're more than welcome to come see me off. Farewell." With that, Nive left the clinic.

I just really didn't understand her sometimes. See her off? Yeah, I really debated about going.

Chapter 3: Vampiric Techniques

“Did everything go okay at the guild?” Isaac asked as we stood in the yard.

After we said our goodbyes to Nive, we had returned to the Latuule estate for the time being. We hadn’t learned any of the special techniques unique to vampires yet. Plus, it would be easier for Isaac to teach both of us at once. Lorraine was free to go back home, but she’d insisted on coming along, noting that it was a rare opportunity to see vampiric abilities in action.

I understood her point. While we had seen vampires using these abilities in the New Moon Dungeon, we had been in the middle of battle. It wasn’t like they had stopped to explain the mechanics behind them. Our knowledge was vague at best.

In general, that was what most people knew about vampires. Nive certainly knew more, but she was a little *too* knowledgeable. I was positive she was closest to understanding the truth about them. She was a good example of how, with enough determination, humans could pretty much do anything. Of course, she wasn’t very humanlike. She’d be mad if she heard me say that, though.

“Yeah, there weren’t any major problems,” I replied. “I thought there’d be a lot more questions, but Wolf already knows my secret. He probably thought I wouldn’t have anything else to hide at this point. Besides, everything happening in Maalt right now is unprecedented. Even if he’d wanted to ask more, he just didn’t have enough information to work from.”

Just what was the probability of someone figuring everything out without knowing anything about the recent events? It had to be close to zero. We only knew because we had been involved from the very beginning. That was just a product of chance.

No matter how sharp Wolf was, he’d need some sort of oracular vision to connect the dots. He only knew that thralls had attacked the city, vampires had shown up, and a new dungeon had suddenly appeared beneath the city.

“I see,” Isaac said, nodding. “Yes, even the guild can’t gather information on matters they know nothing about. Besides, Master Wolf is a pragmatist. He’s more likely to prioritize the issues in front of him that he can deal with.”

“When you put it that way...yeah. That’s what it was like.”

Wolf had primarily talked about how to handle the new dungeon, how things would change in Maalt, and how the guild would deal with those developments. To him, it was more important to figure out what to do from here rather than figuring out the details or the cause. That was definitely pragmatic. No doubt he would like to know everything if it were possible, but not even specialist researchers knew everything about dungeons. Nive, too, had been willing to let others figure out the details. It wasn’t something a guildmaster could discover just by putting in effort.

“I think it’s safe to say we can rest easy for now,” Lorraine stated. “There might be problems once adventurers from other regions and elites from the capital come to Maalt, but for the moment, Rentt and Rina should learn as much about their new abilities as possible. Isaac, you will be demonstrating vampiric techniques, yes?”

Lorraine hadn’t been able to contain her enthusiasm, and Isaac let out a dry chuckle. “Yes, that was the promise. First, let’s begin with *this*.”

Immediately after Isaac finished speaking, his body scattered as though he had exploded. He hadn’t actually exploded, though. I looked closer and could see that his body had turned into several jet-black animals that then flew off.

“Division. Perhaps the most notable vampiric ability,” Lorraine said, intensely interested.

Isaac’s body had split into multiple small bats, and they were currently flying around the area. It seemed as if all the bats had mass, but they looked a bit blurry, as though they would vanish at any moment. When I reached out to touch one nearby, my hand went through it. It did feel like I had touched something, but...it was hard to say. It was like trying to grasp sand that had been flung into the air.

Rina and Lorraine were trying to touch the bats as well, but they couldn’t grab one either. Rina looked like she was enjoying chasing the bats around, and

Lorraine's eyes shimmered with childlike glee. It was practically unheard of to see a vampire use Division and then be allowed to try to touch the divided animals, so her reaction was understandable.

After the bats had flown around for a while, they slowly gathered in a single location and began to form the outline of a human being. Then, in an instant, the bats blurred together, and Isaac was standing there once more.

"How was that? Though I know Rentt and Lorraine have seen this before."

"It is still surprising, though," Lorraine said with a nod. "It gave me a better understanding of what makes vampires so dangerous. In that form, a mage has no option but to trap all the animals in a closed room and try to incinerate them all at once."

Her description sounded a bit scary, but in general, vampires were an enemy. It made sense that she would focus, first and foremost, on how to fight them. Laura and Isaac were exceptions rather than the rule.

"Even if you were to do that, most vampires can revive several times, so it would be difficult. Fights against vampires tend to turn into battles of attrition," Isaac explained.



"However, that's only if you were to fight them conventionally. There are, in fact, other methods," Isaac stated. When we tilted our heads at him, he added, "For example, divinity. We're particularly weak to it. It burns us, and if imbued in a weapon, it can do an immense amount of damage. Still, it's not enough to kill us outright. The most it does is slow the process and decrease the number of times we can regenerate."

Thinking back on it, Isaac hadn't liked being near the pseudo-holy tree that Lorraine had created. While it wasn't a lot, divinity still flowed out from it. However, Isaac had left it growing in the yard and had made no attempt to get any closer to it. He really must have found it unpleasant. I couldn't help but wonder why he didn't just yank it out and dispose of it, but I supposed his loyalty to Laura was more important. However, it was a big discovery to learn that you could reduce the number of times a vampire could regenerate. After all, if you couldn't, you'd end up in a never-ending battle.

That must have been what Nive was doing in the New Moon Dungeon. Nive was a lot better at using divinity than me, so I honestly couldn't tell when she was using it. Her Holy Fire was obvious, but she usually didn't use divinity that way when fighting vampires. Given that even I could hide my divinity to a certain extent, there was no way that Nive, with her greater experience, couldn't hide hers. That must have been it.

The reason the vampires had been so shocked during that fight was because they had just learned that there was a limit to their regeneration and that their reserves were depleting faster than expected. That had all been Nive's divinity. It spoke to her twisted personality that she had demoralized them and broken their spirit without mentioning that fact.

I supposed that was fine. I'd known already that she had a...problematic personality. But she generally reserved that for vampires. She wasn't that bad with everyone else.

"Is there anything other than divinity that works?" Lorraine asked.

"There's this, as an example." Isaac suddenly retrieved a sword out of thin air.

He had only swung his arm, but... Just where did that come from? Was it some sort of sleight of hand? Was Isaac a magician? Nah, that couldn't be it.

Just to be clear, a magician was someone who could do seemingly magical feats without the use of magic. They would often do things that magic couldn't, using one sleight of hand trick or the other. Once you knew the mechanics behind their tricks, it was often anticlimactic. But since it was entertaining to watch, there were quite a few magicians wandering around as entertainers.

Anyway, back to the sword Isaac had just taken out.

"That's...the sword you used against Shumini? It looked a lot bigger at the time."

Isaac was currently holding a thin thrusting sword, which was why I'd been caught off guard. But when Isaac gripped the hilt with all his strength, the blade began to grow until it was the greatsword he'd carried at the time. The blade itself was red.

Damn, that's a cool-looking sword. But what was it? Some sort of magical

sword?

I wasn't the only one who was curious. Lorraine asked, "That weapon... Is it a magic sword? I've seen swords whose blades grow larger when imbued with mana, but..."

Oh, those existed? Well, blacksmiths created various magical weapons through trial and error. It was probably safe to assume that someone, somewhere, had already succeeded in crafting a sword with all the properties you could imagine. Whether they were actually effective enchantments remained to be seen.

In that sense, Isaac's sword wasn't particularly unusual. But what drew my attention was the fact that it had suddenly appeared in Isaac's hand. Was that one of the enchantments? If so, it meant that it could teleport just a part of the weapon. I didn't get it.

Isaac sensed our confusion and began to explain. "This is a special weapon known as a San Arms. It's a mana blade crafted by a vampiric blacksmith. By using the wielder's blood, the wielder can store it within their body. With this weapon, you can inflict damage on even a vampire as though they were an ordinary human."

San Arms. There were weapons like that? Since he'd called it a mana blade, it must have been some type of magic sword.

A mana blade and a magic sword were slightly different. "Magic sword" was a broad term for weapons enchanted with magic, while a mana blade referred to particularly powerful weapons of that type. I was sure Lorraine would say I was being imprecise and there was a more technical definition, but most adventurers would never get their hands on a mana blade. They weren't exactly a common item. Plus, they could cost dozens, if not hundreds of platinum pieces. Not even I could buy one right now.

My current sword was just a magic sword. It was a simple weapon that could handle mana, spirit, and divinity. Clope would gripe at that description, though. It was, without a doubt, a quality sword, so complaining about it would be ungrateful. Besides, if Clope had the materials and the money, he could most likely make a mana blade.

“So vampiric blacksmiths can craft mana blades,” Lorraine murmured, sounding surprised.

For the most part, mana blades were high-level dungeon items or ancient artifacts that had been discovered somewhere. That, or they’d occasionally show up at an auction. They were extremely difficult to craft from scratch and almost impossible to reproduce, so I understood Lorraine’s surprise.

Isaac continued, “As far as I’m aware, there’s only one vampiric blacksmith that can produce such weapons, and no one can copy their techniques. It’s not something that vampires as a whole can produce. One individual is just an exceptionally talented outlier.”



“We’ve gotten off track. Shall I teach you to use Division?” Isaac said casually, as though instructing us to swing a stick. When he saw our hesitation, he chuckled and said, “It’s actually not that difficult, at least for middle vampires or greater. Even lesser vampires can use it with enough effort, so I believe Miss Rina can also do it. The only issue would be if it turned out that you were of a race that couldn’t actually use Division. We’ll only know once you’ve tried it, however.”

I didn’t mind that last part because there was nothing we could do if so. We didn’t know whether Rina and I were a vampiric variation, a race that was extremely close in nature to vampires, or a completely different race. We were the same in that we needed to feed on human blood, and we had regenerative abilities that rivaled that of vampires. We were probably either a variation or a similar race that could use similar abilities.

“So, how does it work?” I asked Isaac.

Unlike magic, spirit, and divinity, you couldn’t try Division without knowing the general approach. It was the same as not being able to cook even basic dishes unless you knew how to use a knife and how to use various seasonings. Lorraine had once tried to chop a potato with a kitchen knife using both hands. She did manage to cut it in half, but she’d split the cutting board in two. I supposed that was something every beginner went through, regardless of the field.

“The first thing to work on is image training. Think of your body as a collection of something else. As for what that ‘something else’ is, that depends on the person. In my case, bats were the easiest thing to imagine, which is why my Division looks like this.”

Isaac used Division on his fingertip, which turned into three bats that flew off before returning and reforming into his finger.

“Ah, so it’s possible to do partial Division?” Lorraine asked.

“If anything, partial Division is how we start. It’s more difficult to use it on your entire body. Since your consciousness and your viewpoint scatters into multiple bodies, it’s hard to stay focused. But if you only divide a single body part, it’s like looking in different directions at the same time. It’s much easier to acclimate to the sensation that way.”

While I understood what he was saying, I felt like I’d definitely get disoriented and maybe even get motion sickness. But perhaps it was similar to how I felt when I was controlling the miniature airship. That split my viewpoint in two. But my consciousness as well?

“It’s a little scary to think about,” I uttered.

“There’s not much to be afraid of,” Isaac assured me. “If a beginner tried it on their own, they could end up so scattered that their consciousness completely disperses and they vanish, but I’m here as a more experienced wielder. If you’re in danger, I can force you back into a single form.”

That just made it sound even scarier. You could disappear if you failed? I wasn’t just feeling hesitant now.

Isaac saw that I was worried and added, “Oh, as for forcefully returning you to a single form, I can only do that when you’re starting out, so there’s nothing to worry about there. Once you learn to control your own Division, no one can interfere with it.”

I wasn’t worried about that, but I decided not to say it aloud. I knew I was just trying to salvage a little dignity. But either way, it would be a useful skill to learn. Even if it was frightening, I had to do it. There was no point in fretting about it.

“Okay, I guess I’ll try it. Who should go first? Rina or me?”

Isaac paused a moment before saying, “Let’s have Miss Rina try it first. Honestly, in your case, Rentt, your powers seem to be a bit unstable, so I can’t quite say what might happen.”

“Indeed, that’s true. There was the whole incident with the ignition spell,” Lorraine said in agreement.

I had used a spell that was supposed to produce a little spark, but I’d created a giant pillar of fire. It was definitely hard to tell what would happen if I tried Division. Still, my water magic was decent. Why had my ignition spell reacted that way? I couldn’t figure that out. Well, it was fine. At least I could make my own drinking water. I’d just let Rina handle lighting the campfires from now on. If I did it, I’d just end up being an arsonist rather than a camper.

“While I hate to admit it, that sounds like the right call. Okay, then. Rina, you ready?” I asked.

Rina nodded enthusiastically. “Yes! I’ll do my best!”

There wasn’t any trepidation in her voice. It seemed she had a lot more nerve than I did. But that had been true ever since the first day we met. Rina had kept insisting that I could go to the city despite my appearance. Perhaps it was a little reckless to do so, but sometimes adventurers needed that sort of courage. Of course, courage in excess could very well kill you. Rina was pretty hard to kill now, so it worked out, all things considered.

“Shall we give it a try, Miss Rina?” Isaac asked. When she nodded, he instructed, “Try to do what I explained earlier. First, consider your body as a collection of something else. Then imagine that your fingertip can move on its own. Since your unconscious mind also affects your form, what appears from your fingertip might be different from what you imagined, but don’t panic, and just try to treat that new object as part of yourself.”

Rina must have been spreading her imagination’s wings as she listened to Isaac. She closed her eyes and focused. And, several moments later, it happened.



The outline of Rina's fingertip began to waver, as if the border between her body and the world around her began to blur. Then it turned into a black haze, looking more and more like a shadow before it suddenly leaped away.

Rina's entire hand had vanished. The object that had detached itself began circling her.

"She did it," Isaac said.

Rina had successfully performed partial Division, the very first step in mastering the art itself. However, she didn't react to Isaac's words. Or rather, she wasn't able to. Her eyes stared blankly into space, and sweat seeped out of her pores. It seemed maintaining the Division was taking quite a toll on her.

"Is she all right?" I asked Isaac.

"Everyone reacts like this at first," he answered. "You just have to keep doing it and get used to the feeling. Still, her Division is unusual."

Isaac looked at the object that had detached itself from Rina. Lorraine and I also turned to look.

"Hm? It's a cat?" Lorraine said, tilting her head.

With its graceful lines, long tail, and pointy ears, it was most definitely a cat. Be that as it may, it didn't look like a real cat, but a shadow of a cat come to life. Were it a real cat, it would have had eyes that glowed in the dark and a pink tongue that peeked out from its mouth. This cat had neither of those features. It was entirely black, from its limbs to its ears.

Out of curiosity, I asked, "It doesn't look very real. Is it supposed to look like that?"

"As she gets more used to it, it will start to look more like the real thing. For example..."

Isaac divided his own fingertip. A moment later, it formed into a bat that, unlike the earlier examples, looked exactly like a real flesh and blood bat. It had eyes and a mouth, and upon closer inspection, it also had fur. In fact, if I hadn't known ahead of time, I wouldn't have been able to tell that it was a part of Isaac.

“This version is still the easiest to make,” Isaac continued. The bat’s details faded, and it changed into a shadowy simulacrum of a bat.

“Hm, how interesting,” Lorraine muttered. “I’d like to try it, but it’s probably not possible for a normal human,” she said with a faintly envious tone.

Well, yeah. It’d be creepy if a normal human could do it. Or maybe it’d be fun if they could. Of course, it was debatable if Lorraine counted as a normal human. I’d never say that to her face, though.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to accept your limitations,” Isaac stated as he watched Rina. “Ah, it looks like she’s nearing her limit. Miss Rina, can you hear me? If you can, try to turn the cat back into your hand. Just focus on that image.”

Rina made no indication that she’d heard him, but the cat that had been wandering around her suddenly changed course. It had been a few strides away, but it slowly approached her before leaping toward her arm. The moment the cat reached Rina’s wrist, it slowly wavered and dissipated, melding into her. In the blink of an eye, her hand had returned to normal.

Rina had been staring blankly into space until then, but she suddenly collapsed in place. Lorraine and I ran over to support her. Her breathing was labored, and she looked tired.

“Hey, you all right?” Lorraine asked, concerned.

I added, “It might be best if you lie down.”

Though her features were drenched in sweat, she replied in a firm voice, “No, it’s okay. It just feels like I ran with all my strength. I’ll be fine with a little rest. I think...”

Ah, so it felt like sprinting—or something that burned about the same amount of physical energy. She was just extra tired because she wasn’t used to the exertion. At least, I thought that was why she was tired.

The vampires we’d met in the New Moon Dungeon had also felt drained after they used Division, but less so than Rina. I guessed they could withstand it because they had already practiced the technique. Even then, as Nive had explained, there was a limit to how long they could maintain it. It wasn’t an all-powerful ability that made you immune to damage.

“Is resting enough for her to recover?” I asked Isaac.

“Yes. Because it was her first time, it’s best she take a fairly long rest, but there will be no lasting effects. However, she’ll need to practice this several times to get the hang of it, so she’ll have to try again while the sensations are still fresh in her mind.”

So she would have to repeat it before she fully recovered. That sounded harsh. Not that I knew how harsh it was...yet.

I started to wonder what it felt like, so I asked Rina, “What do you think of Division now that you’ve tried it?”

I felt a little bad about quizzing her while she was tired, but it didn’t look like she was so tired she couldn’t hold a conversation.

“I felt a bit confused. It really did feel like looking at different things with each eye. And it felt like there were two of me. I mean, they were both me, but since I was looking at something else at a slightly different location, my thoughts started to diverge. It’s really hard to remember that you’re all the same person.”

That must have felt completely alien to a human. I wasn’t a human anymore, but it was definitely something I’d have to experience to really understand.

Lorraine listened to Rina’s explanation with interest. She looked like she had a thousand questions but evidently couldn’t bring herself to subject Rina to such an interrogation when she was so exhausted. A short conversation was one thing, but Lorraine’s inquiries tended to go on at length, and she liked precise details. It could be a draining experience.

“At any rate,” Isaac interjected, sounding grave, “it appears Miss Rina has cleared the first hurdle. If she continues to practice, she should be able to master full-body Division as well. She’s picking it up quickly. A promising student, I would say.”

A promising student? What did that even mean for a sorta-vampire? Like she could maybe become a demon lord? I’d heard there weren’t any vampire demon lords, so actually it might be a good goal. An image of Rina lounging on a throne in some castle situated atop a mountain, swirling blood in her glass like

wine as a host of handsome young men naked from the waist up surround her popped into my head...

Okay, that was definitely a weird thought. Although, maybe she'd look good in that role. Nah, I was just kidding.



"It seems like Rina won't have any problems, then," Lorraine stated. "If she keeps this up, she'll be able to master other vampiric abilities. Though whether that's a good thing is debatable."

I knew what she was trying to say. It wasn't as though Rina had wanted to become a pseudo-vampire. She hadn't mentioned a desire to become a powerful example of one either. So whether it was good to have that promising talent remained to be seen. That said, Rina *was* an adventurer. The simple fact that she had gotten stronger was worth celebrating.

It'd be a problem if Rina ever found a way to become a human again. There was no way of knowing if she could retain her current monstrous abilities. But there was no point worrying about that at the moment. Perhaps there would come a day when she'd have to choose between her strength or her race, but if that ever happened, it would be her choice to make.

"Living as a vampire isn't that bad either," Isaac replied. "You won't die of old age. However, there's an indescribable ennui that comes from being left behind as the times change, and staying in a single place can cause issues, so I can't say with certainty that it's a *great* life. The answers to those questions don't come in a single night, so Rina will have to struggle with them herself."

Isaac paused for a moment before saying, "Let's test your Division, Rentt. Are you ready?"

I nodded with confidence. I'd been in countless bizarre situations before, so I was no longer fazed by this level of uncertainty. I still hoped that nothing too weird happened, though. But all I'd be doing was using Division, so even if something truly strange did occur, I'd just end up dividing into the shadow of some strange creature. I didn't want to turn into a cockroach or anything, but that would be the worst of it, right?

“Now that you’re mentally prepared, let’s get started. You already heard how to do it when I described it to Miss Rina, so all that’s left is for you to try it. You do remember, yes?”

Yes, even I, with my bird-like attention span, could still recall something I’d heard ten minutes ago. First, I needed to imagine my body as a collection of separate objects. If I remembered correctly, I was supposed to think of them as independent entities, and then I should be able to divide. Just in case, I confirmed the steps with Isaac anyway.

“Yes, that’s exactly right. The important question is what you imagine yourself dividing into. Since you’ve seen my bats and Miss Rina’s cat, it should be easy enough?”

“True. I feel like I’ve got a rough idea of how it works.”

Now that I had to consider it, I wasn’t sure what that creature should be. I knew I was really indecisive when it came to this sort of thing. Maybe a dog since Rina was a cat? Okay, maybe that was a little too thoughtless. Oh, since I have Edel, maybe a mouse? Then again, a mouse can’t fly. I knew based on my experience with the airship that I found freedom soaring through the blue skies. I could already fly on my own, though, so I didn’t know if there was any reason to obsess on that detail. Gah, this was a lot harder than I’d thought it would be!

“Oh, that reminds me,” Lorraine said as though suddenly struck by a thought, “you and Rina both used animals for your images, but is it possible to imagine something else? Like a plant, for example.”

“It’s not impossible, but since the form is fixed once you use it, it wouldn’t be wise,” Isaac answered.

Isaac had meant that as a warning, but as I listened to their exchange, I couldn’t get the image of myself as a tree out of my head. The moment I felt my fingertip changing, I realized my mistake. My finger wavered, and then something began growing out of it.

Hey, wasn’t that... Oh no. Branches, leaves...

I tried to stop it, but the transformation had already spread up my arm. My entire arm had become a branch. I, the walking fertilizer pile, was going to end

up a plant myself. It sounded like a joke, but it wasn't funny.

I was now a collection of plants. So my body was becoming a forest? Wait, a forest had animals, like birds and rabbits and stuff. And depending on where that forest was, there could even be dragons.

Once my thought process reached that point, I saw shadows of rabbits and birds flying out of my other arm. I was seeing all this through two different perspectives, and I was struck by a brief sense of vertigo, but I quickly grew used to the feeling. It must have helped that I'd already experienced something similar with the model airship.

That made me think of something. I was supposed to imagine myself as a collection of something, but nothing said I had to be just one thing. Perhaps Isaac hadn't mentioned it because it was obvious to him, but it seemed I was able to pull it off, so no harm done.

I continued my brainstorming. For example, not all plants were rooted to the ground. It was useful to transform into something else, but it would be really inconvenient if I couldn't move at all. Fortunately, there were trees that could move on their own. There were shrub ents and tree spirits like dryads. So even if I turned into a plant, it was perfectly reasonable that I could still move.

My imagination began turning my body into a really weird collage of objects. Lorraine, Isaac, and Rina's eyes were all wide in shock as they watched my transformation. But once it started, there wasn't anything I could do to stop it.

I continued dividing in the direction my thoughts took me...

Side Story: Isaac the Vampire

It was said that Division showed a vampire's individuality. It required thinking of yourself as a collection of something else, and there was no way everyone shared the same image of what that something was. Just as humans had their individual traits, so did vampires. Still, most stuck to a few broad trends.

For example, dividing yourself into bats was common. That was because they had seen many of their teachers or forebears turn into bats when demonstrating Division. Just as I was currently teaching others how to divide, everyone learned the ability from someone with more experience. It was only natural that one would fixate on the example they first saw.

Nevertheless, there was nothing that required the form to be a bat. When we first learned how to divide, we were told that we could choose whatever we liked. Rina had become a cat, but there were examples of other animals as well. But for Rina, even when she learned to divide her entire body, all of her forms would be cats. That was how Division worked. No matter how many bodies I created, they would all be bats.

However, just what was I witnessing?

Rentt. Rentt Faina.

First, he turned himself into a tree. That, while extremely rare, wasn't inconceivable. It was up to the individual what they wanted to become, so it was perfectly plausible to become a tree if you so wished. But because mobility was largely dependent on the form itself, it was almost unheard of. At the very least, I'd never seen a vampire divide into a plant.

I felt that Rentt's choice demonstrated just how unusual he was. But that was fine. The issue was what happened after.

Rentt must have realized how inconvenient that form would be, because his expression turned to one of panic.

The very first transformation was extremely important, and once you

imagined your divided form, it was extremely difficult to change it. It wasn't impossible, but once you divided into something, your mind turned to the same thing out of habit. Changing that required an enormous amount of effort and technique, so choosing the right form at the start was essential.

Nonetheless, if you were too preoccupied with that issue, you could fail to divide, so it was a difficult balance. That was why the teacher or mentor would demonstrate their own Division first, providing an easy example for the pupil to follow and relieving some of the pressure of choosing. Hence, as I noted earlier, most vampires turned into bats.

There were exceptions, and of those, most chose different animals. Practically no vampires had attempted anything particularly different. And yet here was Rentt Faina, attempting to further divide his plant body.

Something else started flying out of his arm. When I looked closely, I saw rabbits and birds. They were shadowy black silhouettes at first, perfectly normal for a beginner, but as they began to scurry around Rentt, they gradually became sharper until they were nearly indistinguishable from the real thing.

Then other things began appearing—boars, small dragons, mice. Meanwhile, his body began to twist into a dark mass, as though he were becoming a gloomy, cursed forest. He was now several times his original size, bringing Shumini's monstrous body to mind.

I'd honestly thought he'd failed, so I was about to intervene. However, the various animals scurrying around suddenly paused as though summoned by something and returned to the forest. Once they were all back, the forest itself began to shrink.

The bright greenery dimmed to inky black shadows and began to coalesce into a humanoid outline. The animals looked like they were trying to break free of Rentt's silhouette, but that only lasted a few moments. Gradually, his form slowly grew more stable. Then the black silhouette finally melded back into Rentt Faina—which meant he hadn't failed.

Yes, Rentt Faina had successfully used Division. Though he had changed into that chaotic morass, dividing his consciousness into several dozen forms, he had controlled all of them, returning them to his original body and bringing himself

back into existence. Only vampires who could utilize Division could understand how difficult a feat he had just accomplished. There were stories of rare, extremely talented vampires who had managed complex Division techniques from the start, but since I hadn't expected Rentt to be one of them, I was shocked.

Perhaps this was a bit of a mixed blessing. The fact that he'd accomplished such a feat wasn't an indicator of skill in and of itself. How would I describe it? It meant that he could precisely control how much power to output, but it wasn't related to his reservoir of mana or spirit. That wasn't to say it was pointless. Control was important for Division, so what Rentt had done was really admirable. We didn't know the scale of his full potential, but it would be a treat to watch him grow into his powers.

On the other hand, how was I to interpret the unusual nature of his Division? Was it because Rentt wasn't a standard vampire? But if so, Rina had an edge over him. Yet her Division had been standard. Was there some other cause, then? I didn't know.

"Phew, somehow managed to do it. Isaac, how was it? Did I do it right?" Rentt asked, oblivious to my confusion.

I had no accurate answer to his question, so I just said, "Yes, you were able to do it. However, it was a very strange Division. You couldn't do it normally?"

My words came out a bit more barbed than I'd intended. I must have let my mixed feelings creep into my tone. Surely no one could blame me for that.



For some reason, Isaac was staring at me with a look of exasperation. I briefly wondered what I had done wrong, but evidently that wasn't the problem. I asked why he was looking at me that way, and he explained it was because it was unusual to accomplish a full-body Division on your first try and it was extraordinarily rare to change into multiple animals and plants.

Controlling the various objects was similar to controlling magic or spirit, so it came naturally to me. My lack of power in those fields had forced me to learn how to precisely regulate them. Nevertheless, it had felt strange for my perspectives and consciousness to divide into multiple bodies.

But no matter how many times I divided, I was still me, so it wasn't that hard to bring myself back into a single body and consciousness. It was like a greater consciousness controlled everything, and you just had to collect everything into that. If you asked me how to do that, though, I could only say that was how I imagined it.

When I explained that, Lorraine quipped, "Ah, I see. So it's like you divided your multiple consciousnesses into a commander and soldiers. I can see how that would maintain coherence even if your awareness was divided into multiple bodies. But I could also see those soldiers suddenly taking matters into their own hands."

"It's a standard method, actually," Isaac explained. "There are other methods, but that one is simple and the most efficient. As you surmised, there are times when the parts begin acting of their own accord, so it's a very difficult method for dividing your entire body. Yet it seems Rentt managed to control the situation using his strong will and brute force. Normally, that method is for two or three parts only."

So it was a technique for controlling partial Division. You turn the human part of you into the commander and the detached parts into soldiers. But for the reasons Lorraine mentioned, it wasn't suited for full-body Division. Still, I'd been able to do it, so there wasn't much else to say.

"Miss Rina, you would do best to avoid emulating that method," Isaac said gravely. "It's better to steadily build up your skill through practice. Outliers like Rentt aren't useful models."

"I-I understand. Besides, it's not like I ever thought I could emulate him!"

Why did she refer to me like I was some eccentric weirdo? It was a little hurtful, but there were a bunch of odd things about me. Given that I went from being a skeleton to a vampire, only to find out that I wasn't quite a vampire, I knew I was some odd mix of human and monster. I had no right to claim that I was normal. However, Rina was a monster now too. I figured she'd burst out crying if I said that, so I wasn't going to say it out loud. Besides, she was my friend.

"Anyway, I guess this means you're a proper vampire now? You were always

hard to kill, but now I think we can safely conclude that you're pretty much unkillable," Lorraine said rather casually.

In terms of endurance, my body would keep regenerating when damaged, even without Division. I was a lot harder to kill than the average human, and now that I had Division under my belt, I could just reform any loss.

I was getting further and further away from human. Wasn't my original goal to find a way to be human again? A part of me felt conflicted that I'd changed so much, but since it meant I was harder to kill for the moment, I supposed I'd just live with it for now.

"Yes, most methods can't destroy you, but you shouldn't be too reliant on those abilities," Isaac warned. "There are several ways to inflict serious damage on a vampire. It's very dangerous to think you can take any attack and survive. The biggest cause of death among newly created vampires is because they lose their sense of danger."

"Do you have an example?" Lorraine asked.

"The most common examples are those who go on a rampage, doing whatever they want because they feel they can't die, only to end up the target of a divinity user. Divinity-imbued weapons won't necessarily destroy you on contact, but you can feel they're more effective than ordinary weapons. That usually causes more panic and confusion than normal, and before you know it, you're dead without putting up any notable resistance. It's definitely one of the sadder ways a vampire can meet their end."

Similar things happened to adventurers all the time. A freshly promoted adventurer could take their class ascension as an increase in strength and wander too deep in a dungeon and die. It seemed that sort of thing was the same whether you were a human or a vampire. But since it was just one of the *sadder* ways a vampire could meet their end, it sounded like there were worse ways to die? There were also plenty of ways to make them suffer.

When I started thinking of ways to torture a vampire, a lot of things came to mind. I decided to stop that train of thought. It was way too creepy.

"So I shouldn't get too cocky just because I can use Division, right? I'll be careful, then," I murmured to myself.

“That would be best,” Isaac said. “That’s the secret to a long life. Now, this will do for Division. There are other vampiric abilities, and while I want to teach them to you, it’s better that you master Division first. They’ll have to wait for next time.”

I thought it would be better to learn everything at once if we were going to learn them all, so I tilted my head quizzically at Isaac.

He noticed my expression and replied, “I understand your perspective, but there are several techniques that assume a certain mastery of Division. Even for abilities that don’t require that, when you cram in the knowledge, it’s easy to miss the subtleties of their use. Also, Miss Rina looks like she can’t handle any more today.”

While disappointing, Isaac’s reasons were logical. I agreed it was best to wait. I could use Division to some extent, but I couldn’t say I could do it perfectly. According to Isaac, once you mastered it, it would come naturally without much conscious thought or focus. Yeah, that made sense. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be much use in combat. It looked like I’d be training with Rina for a while.

Chapter 4: The Tower and the Academy

The next morning, Lorraine, Rina, and I went to the carriage stop. Just like the last time I was here, there was a wide range of “horses” available, and they were always entertaining to watch. But there were some differences from before.

“There sure are a lot of carriages here,” remarked Rina. “Maybe Maalt needs a bunch of things.”

While this stop hadn’t exactly been deserted the last time, there had been plenty of space for more carriages. Now the stop was congested. I figured cargo was coming in from all sorts of places.

As Rina had noted, Maalt currently needed a wide range of materials and supplies. They needed construction materials to fix the buildings and roads destroyed by the dungeon’s appearance. Furthermore, there weren’t enough laborers in Maalt, so they needed able bodies to help in the reconstruction. That, in turn, fueled an increase in demand for daily necessities such as food and clothing.

Because Maalt was a frontier city, it was mostly self-sufficient, except when it came to specialized items or luxury goods. But now the city had no choice but to import supplies from all around the area, which in turn dramatically increased the flow of people and items.

“Seems there are also more adventurers here to check out the new dungeon,” Lorraine observed. “More researchers are coming and going too. While there aren’t many from the empire, I’ve met several I knew in the royal capital. A freshly spawned dungeon is a rare treat for them. In addition, though people from the Tower or the Academy will conduct the studies and surveys, plenty of people are here to take a look as they tour.”

Lorraine was an eccentric scholar who’d left the empire to move to a backwater city like Maalt. Though she had been here ten years, she wasn’t completely without acquaintances among her peers. That made sense, though.

While she was rather haphazard in her daily life, she was always quick to respond to things like letters. Her shorthand was so hard to read it almost functioned as a cipher, but when she sat down to carefully form a letter, she wrote in a neat, elegant, and feminine script.

She had a fair number of associates among the scholars in Yaaran Kingdom, and every once in a while, she would travel to the capital to trade information or debate various topics of interest. Nonetheless, they were acquainted with someone as unusual as Lorraine. They were also unusual in their own way, and many worked outside the mainstream of Yaaran scholarship.

The Tower and the Academy were the central research hubs in the Yaaran Kingdom, and most investigations started under their guidance. For example, if there was something abnormal, like our recently created dungeon, the Tower or the Academy's researchers would hire all of the dependable adventurers as escorts so that they could enter and survey the dungeon. This often made it difficult for others to conduct their own investigations, though.

Lorraine was a rare specimen in that she was both a scholar and an adventurer. Both career paths were extremely harsh. It was hard to become a first-class adventurer or a first-class scholar, and it was nearly impossible to balance them both and produce notable results. Lorraine was just an exception. That was why she'd mentioned that her acquaintances had come to look while doing a little sightseeing. They likely wanted to enter the dungeon and do some investigating themselves, but the possibility they'd be allowed to do so was small. I figured they came here anyway because they just loved research and wanted to catch even the slightest whiff of it. I could see why they got along with Lorraine.

"I don't know about the Tower," Rina said, looking tired, "but students from the Academy can be kind of snooty. I don't get along with them."

I tilted my head quizzically and asked, "You've met Academy students before, Rina?"

"Well, with my family background, I had a childhood friend who attended the Academy. She was nice and gentle, but her classmates were pretty awful."

Oh, right. Rina was from the royal capital, and her older brother Idoles Rogue

was a promising young knight. I didn't know anything specific, like her family's exact title, but they were of noble heritage. Since you needed either a lot of money or a lot of talent to attend the Academy, the majority of its students were from noble or merchant families. No doubt a good number of them had less than pleasant personalities. Of course, not all of them were like that. Most of Yaaran's nobles were magnanimous and humble, partly because the kingdom itself was considered backwoods and partly because they worshiped the Church of the Eastern Sky.

Besides, everyone started out immature, and based on the average age of students who entered the Academy, most of them started right in the middle of puberty—their rebellious years. Egos were often inflated at that age. I suspected that they would grow out of that by the time they graduated, but I'd never been there. I didn't know what it was actually like. I wanted to visit the Academy sometime, but there was no way a low-ranking adventurer like me would ever get permission. It really was a pity.

“‘Pretty awful’ in what sense?” Lorraine asked Rina.

“I think I mentioned that I worked as an adventurer in the capital. I ran into my friend while I was on a job. I was doing my best to avoid any acquaintances, but...”

“If you're living in the same city, no matter how careful you are, you'll run into an acquaintance sooner or later,” Lorraine quipped.

“Yeah. It wouldn't have been too bad if that was the extent of it, but at the time, my equipment was all beat up and I looked pretty ragged.”

“Like when I first met you?” I asked. “That's kind of unavoidable as a new adventurer.”

When I first met Rina, it had been clear that she paid attention to her appearance. Her clothes were washed, and she kept herself clean. She hadn't looked too bad in my opinion, but her things were a bit old, and some of them looked quite worn. Be that as it may, plenty of adventurers looked worse. There was even the occasional adventurer who smelled faintly sour when they walked past. No matter how worn Rina's clothes were, the fact that she kept them clean made her a lot better than them. Then again, maybe the ones who

smelled were just lazy or sloppy. Still, Rina must have looked different to the nobles living in the capital, even more so to those rich enough to attend the Academy.



“I guess it only made sense, but when my friend saw me, she was really concerned about how I was doing.”

If you suddenly found a friend wandering around in rags, when only a few months before you’d been going to fancy cafes and having afternoon tea together, naturally, you’d be concerned. That required that you were actually a friend, though. If I ran into someone I hated looking like that, I’d probably chuckle. The schadenfreude would be too delicious. Maybe I was an awful person? Well, not much to be done about that. Besides, there weren’t that many people I disliked that much.

“If she was worried about you, what’s wrong with that?” Lorraine asked. “You would explain the situation, and though it might be a tad awkward, you could then go your separate ways.”

It was common to run into a friend, realize that you now lived in different worlds, and, in the end, drift apart. It happened more frequently when you became an adventurer, though, particularly for someone like Rina, who went from being a noble to an adventurer. For people like me, who went from being a villager to an adventurer, the situation was usually the opposite. Even if you only gained a rudimentary understanding of mana or spirit, learned how to fight, and made a living hunting monsters, you’d make a lot more money than the average villager.

Sadly, plenty of adventurers let that go to their heads, treating their old acquaintances as though they were beneath them. But that was a bad idea over the long term. You couldn’t stay an adventurer until you died. While I often swore to myself that I’d be adventuring until my last breath, it definitely wasn’t that simple. After all, adventurers were well acquainted with death. It was an extremely dangerous job.

In a way, it was better to die while you were still an adventurer. The problem was when you didn’t die but couldn’t continue working, like if you suffered a

really bad injury while fighting and lost a limb. That didn't mean you were totally out of luck, though. High-ranking church members could regrow lost limbs. However, you had to make an enormous donation to receive that level of healing. That price was way too high for most adventurers who lived day to day. Also, if neglected too long, the loss would become permanent. I'd heard there were holy people who could fix even that sort of injury, but their price would be astronomical. For a normal adventurer with that kind of injury, it was almost impossible to get it fixed.

When that happened, the adventurer—or *former* adventurer—only had a handful of options left. The simplest option was to go back to their hometown. Yet that was only possible if you'd maintained a cordial relationship with the townspeople. Even then, there were plenty of ex-adventurers who found life in their old village awkward and strangely uncomfortable. If you had crowed about how impressive and rich you were before your injury, you could forget about going home.

That was why it was a bad idea to get too arrogant as an adventurer. The guild was careful to mention this to newly minted adventurers, but most were too busy celebrating to really listen. Things were a little better in Maalt, though. A fair number of the guild's adventurers eventually retired to their hometowns. But this was way off topic.

"That's what I was trying to do," Rina explained, "but she was a bit of a mother hen. She started asking things like, 'Are you eating properly?!' 'Do you want me to fix your worn clothes?!' and 'Where are you staying?!' I couldn't pull away."

As she recounted the story, Rina's lips lifted into a faint smile. She must have appreciated her friend's concern.

Lorraine replied, "I see. She was a good friend, even if she acted more like your mother than your peer."

"Yes. Which is why I was happy I'd run into her, though it was a little awkward. But when we were talking, a few other students from the Academy approached from the other side of the street."

Rina sighed as she explained what had happened.

“I get it. They made fun of her for talking to you, right?” I asked.

That had to be the answer. I mean, it was a common tale. I couldn't remember how many times others had mocked me for the same reason. I'd gotten all sorts of crap. Some had told me to give up being an adventurer; others had said to stop with my attitude. It was exhausting to hear. It wasn't like I'd gone out of my way to approach those people either. They had always found me, somehow. If I replied to them, they'd fake outrage, insisting that they hadn't said anything of the sort. Their vacuous eyes would glaze over and they'd start yelling at me.

It was so frustrating having to deal with people like that, but I had no choice but to accept their existence. Neither they nor the people around them made any attempt to fix their personality. Occasionally, some would realize their failings and attempt to do better, but they were definitely the minority.

“Yes,” Rina replied with a sigh. “They started going on about my appearance, and then lumping my friend in with me because she was speaking to me. I was impressed that they could speak that much without their mouths getting tired.”

“Don't be impressed by that,” I quipped.

“They're students of the Academy, right?” Lorraine interjected. “I'm sure they debate during class. When you're used to arguing your point, you become much better at it.”

Lorraine's comment was a little odd. Part of me felt that her explanation made sense, but she was missing the point.

“You didn't argue back?” I asked, thinking it would've been mentally taxing to just stand there and take it.

Rina shook her head. “It would've been a waste of time. But my friend had a few choice barbs for them. In the end, the Academy students actually lost the argument. It seems my friend was one of the better students there, and when she brought that up, they had no real response.”

“Ah. So the one with the better work ethic won in the end. Wonderful,” Lorraine commented.

Once again, Lorraine was impressed by an odd detail. Based on Rina's

description, her friend wasn't the bubbly type, but rather the assertively protective sort.

"I understand why you're not keen on people from the Academy," I added.



"We're not here to welcome people from the Tower or the Academy," Lorraine stated. "No need to let it trouble you."

Since I was technically a guild employee, there was a chance that Wolf might assign me that sort of task, but that wasn't why we were here today. So why had we come to the carriage stop? That was obvious.

"Oh? If it isn't Rentt and his friends. Did you actually come to say goodbye? I'm shocked," Nive Maris, the infamous vampire hunter, called out from behind us.

Since she had told us that she'd be leaving in the morning, we had come to see her off despite our mixed feelings. She'd made life in Maalt a little more tense than I liked, but she had also given us a lot of information, and her advice had come in handy more than once. In particular, it would've been much harder to deal with the various vampire-related incidents without her. Laura and Isaac might have been able to deal with it themselves, but then we would've been stuck dealing with a big group of lesser vampires and their regenerative abilities.

If the Maaltesian adventurers had known that vampires eventually stopped regenerating or that newly created ones had stamina issues, things might have ended differently. On the other hand, if they hadn't slain the young vampires when they did, Shumini's plans might have proceeded more smoothly. If that had happened, Maalt would have been consumed by the dungeon.

At the very least, Nive's presence had worked out in Maalt's favor. That was why I felt we should at least say goodbye to her. There were times when I found her annoying, but that was the worst of it. Besides, her hunches had more or less been right. Though, if you were to ask whether Rina and I were ordinary vampires, I'd have to say no.

"We're allowed to come see you off, aren't we? You said we could," I replied.

“Yes, but I know you don’t really like me, Rentt. I’m surprised to see you here. Did you maybe really fall in love with me?”

“Nope.”

“You don’t have to shoot me down so quickly...”

I didn’t know if she’d been kidding or not, but Nive looked a bit crestfallen. I doubted she was actually disappointed, though. Her personality was about as far from romantic as it could be.

“Well, here you are, I suppose. Allow me to thank you. I thought Lady Myullias would be the only one here.”

I looked to the side and saw Myullias Raiza, a saint of the Church of Lobelia. She looked the part, with her silver locks framing her beautiful features, but I could see a faint shadow of fatigue on her face.

As of late, all of the religious organizations, including the Church of Lobelia, had been busy. Priests and clerics were running around the city. There probably wasn’t an end to the list of things they had to do, like comforting, healing, and preaching to the people of Maalt. I was sure Myullias still had plenty of work on her plate. The fact she was here must have meant she had a certain amount of affection for Nive.

As I was thinking that, Myullias shouted a bit sharply, “In my case, I’m obligated to be here by order of the Great Church-Father. And I’m not here to say goodbye; I’m coming with you!”



Her demeanor was far from the demure and pure image of a saint. It didn't feel out of place, however, because that was Myullias's actual personality.

Nive looked to Myullias and said, "You don't have to go out of your way to accompany me. Besides, it's clear you're here to keep an eye on me. Why should I, a law-abiding adventurer, accept that a saint of the Church of Lobelia is putting me under surveillance?"

"I don't really know, but... Anyway, it's an order. So, please, give up already. You wouldn't want the Church of Lobelia to treat you like an apostate."

"Oh, dear. Do as you wish, then. Would you like to come as well, Rentt? Hunting vampires can be quite stimulating and entertaining."

I was sure it could be, but it also sounded frightening and dangerous. Wandering the world and hunting beings like Shumini was pretty much suicide. I figured that eventually I'd need to be able to kill a monster like that on my own, but that was still a long way off. It might be safer with Nive as a companion, but it was one thing to worry about running into monsters; it was a different thing entirely to worry about her killing me in my sleep. So, nope.

I shook my head. "I'll pass this time. But it's not like I'll always be in Maalt. I'm sure we'll meet again someday."

Though, I hoped it wouldn't be soon. I swallowed those last words, but it seemed Nive heard them anyway.

"Fate will bring us together again. I'll be looking forward to that day. Oh?"

Nive turned to a group of carriages making their way to the carriage stop. There were about ten of them in a row, all decorated the same way. They were obviously expensive and well made, and the horses pulling them were powerful draft animals.

"Seems they've finally arrived. Those carriages are from the Academy," Lorraine murmured.

Nive nodded. "Yes, so it appears. The Tower will be here eventually, but they presumably have more equipment to carry, so it'll take them a few more days."

The Tower was more focused on research, while the Academy was, at its core,

an educational institution. Certainly, the Tower would be bringing a lot more specialized survey equipment. Precision magic items were usually large and fragile, and even if dismantled, it would take time to transport them. While the two groups had probably left the capital at around the same time, the Academy had arrived in Maalt first.

“Still, there are a lot of them,” Nive murmured ominously as she watched the caravan. “Considerably so. There might be some trouble on the horizon. It’d be fun to stay, but...there are no more vampires here.”

After she said that, I couldn’t help but feel a bit anxious about Maalt’s future.



“Since we’re fated to meet again, I suppose you’ll tell me all about the coming festivities, Rentt. It’s about time for me to leave, so I’ll say goodbye here.”

I really would’ve preferred not to be fated to see her again, but Nive’s intuition was fairly accurate. I made a note to myself to be careful.

When I turned in the direction Nive was looking, I saw a man standing in front of a carriage, looking irritated. Nive had glanced at him as she spoke, so that had to be her and Myullias’s carriage, and that man had to be the driver or something.

I realized that he was affiliated with the Church of Lobelia in some fashion because he looked at Myullias with respect. I also noticed that the carriage had the church’s symbol on it. It didn’t look particularly expensive, but it was still better than the average carriage. It was definitely out of my price range.

Since I’d spent so much on my magic bag, I’d been keeping my purse strings pulled tight. Even though I was much better off than I’d been in the past, there was no telling when I might have an unexpected expense. For an adventurer, the more powerful the monster, the more expensive it was to remove it. Making a name for yourself required a certain amount of savings. Even so, there were plenty of adventurers who made a habit of living one day at a time. Not to mention, it was cooler to be that sort of adventurer.

Maybe I should try living like that too. I briefly considered it, but I was too cautious to live that way, so I immediately rejected that idea.

“This was a bit smoother than I expected,” I said to Nive, “but I do feel we’ll see each other again. So at the very least, stay safe until then.”

Truthfully, I was hoping she’d struggle enough to forget killing me in my sleep. I couldn’t very well say that out loud, though.

“That’s a really normal thing to say. It doesn’t sound particularly like you, but I guess you’re just being polite. No need to worry. The only thing that would ever get me down is if there were no more vampires to kill.”

“Uh-huh.”

That almost sounded like she was saying that wouldn’t happen until I was dead, but... No, I was like a vampire, but I wasn’t actually one. Or so I tried to convince myself.

Nive and Myullias waved as they boarded their carriage, and they departed with so little fanfare that it was easy to forget just how much of a storm they’d kicked up during their time in Maalt.

“I suppose that’s one load off our shoulders,” Lorraine murmured as she watched them pull away.

“I don’t know. Nive’s prediction, her prophecy, suggests there’s going to be some trouble.”

“Unfortunately, she’s probably right. The Tower, the Academy, and a dungeon are all assembled in a single place. With all of these people flowing into the city, something is bound to happen. But can’t you at least relax knowing that you and Rina won’t be suspected of being vampires?”

“I’d hope so, but if recent events taught me anything, it’s that sharp intuition isn’t exactly in short supply. I can’t really let my guard down.”

In Nive’s case, she’d strengthened her intuition with experience and logical inferences. I didn’t think we’d see anyone quite as bad as her any time soon, but that didn’t mean I should stop being cautious.

“I understand that we can’t let our guard down, but just what are we supposed to do, specifically? I have no experience with this, so I don’t have the first clue,” Rina said with a troubled frown.

That made sense. I'd been undead for a while, so I'd learned what made people suspicious. Rina had only been undead for a few days. That was the sort of thing I'd need to teach her. It wasn't particularly complicated either.

"First, don't go wandering around in the middle of the night," I instructed.

I hoped that went without saying. People like us wandering around in the dead of night were suspicious. The sort of activity drew the attention of people like Nive.

"Mm, yes, that makes sense. What else?"

"Let's see. The other thing is to be as friendly as possible. Most people think of the undead as being gloomy. Make sure you go out of your way to energetically greet people every morning."

I'd been doing that for as long as I'd been living in Lorraine's house. It wasn't like I was deeply interacting with anyone, however; I'd just greet people from the neighborhood if I ran into them while I was burning the trash or something. I'd also interact with the old ladies when I was shopping at the market and such.

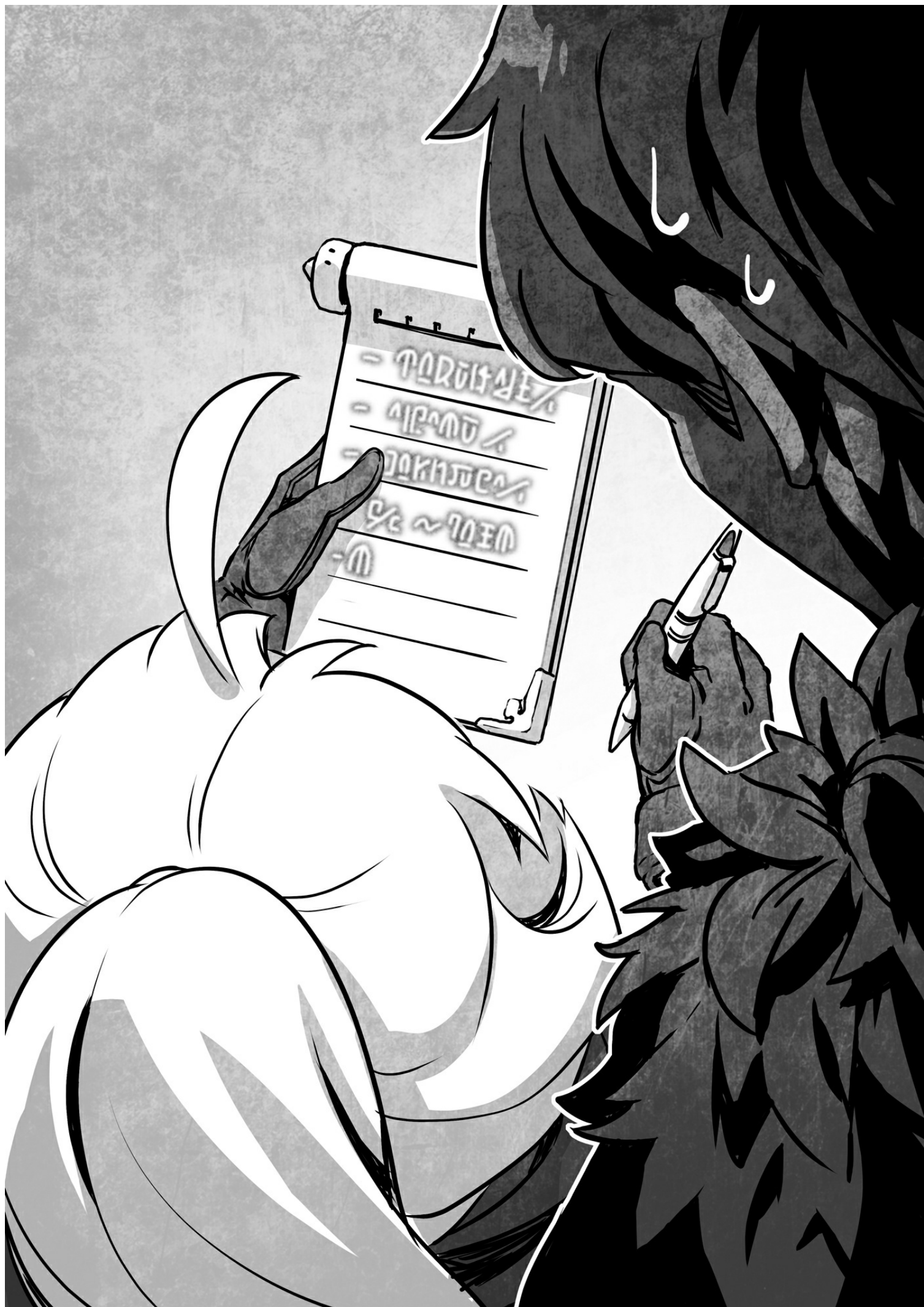
"Greetings are one of the fundamental parts of being human!" Rina added.

"Exactly. Let's see what else..."

After I taught Rina some of the basics of blending into human society, Lorraine looked at me and murmured, "It sounds like advice you'd give a child when they're staying away from home for the first time."

It didn't sound like that, did it? When I looked at Rina for confirmation, she was busily jotting down my advice in her notebook, a magic item that Lorraine had crafted and given to her. It would have been expensive to buy.

I peered over her shoulder and looked at its contents. "Don't be out at night!" "Greetings are important!" and "Be kind to neighbors! etc." It was all written in cute bubble letters.



They did sound like warnings to a child. I looked from Rina to Lorraine and noticed that she was chuckling. There was a part of me that wanted to complain about her attitude, but if our positions were reversed, I'd likely laugh at her too.

"But, I'm not wrong, am I?" I asked just to be sure.

"No, you aren't wrong. The people in our neighborhood think you're just a pleasant freeloader living at my house."

It was good that no one suspected me, but...a pleasant freeloader? That might be ruining the reputation of the undead. Not that I minded.

Just as I was thinking that, an angry shout rang out across the carriage stop.

"You! Just how do you intend to answer for this?!"



"What is it? What happened?" Lorraine asked, turning in the direction of the shouting.

Rina and I turned too. There we saw a young man wearing an expensive-looking robe and a middle-aged man who looked like a traveling merchant.

"A child?" I murmured.

Lorraine nodded. "So it seems. They look about ten years old. He's quite haughty for his age, but... Ah, that robe is familiar. You've seen it too, right, Rina?"

"It's the Academy's uniform," Rina confirmed. "He probably arrived in one of those carriages from earlier." Her expression was troubled, perhaps because the sight brought back memories of the rude Academy students.

It was the first time I'd ever seen an Academy uniform. That was to be expected, since it was rare for a country bumpkin like me to see anyone from the Academy. I supposed I could have seen them when I was in the capital a while ago, but I didn't remember seeing any. That could have been because I was dressed oddly, so I wasn't paying any attention to how other people looked.

"That's a nice uniform, huh?" I noted. On one hand, it was simply a well-

tailored, expensive-looking uniform, but the clothing also looked nice, from my perspective as an adventurer.

“Yes. It’s made out of mana wool reinforced with alchemy, and there are several magic circles stitched into it with silk. An Academy student has to deal with various dangers, like magic practice or chemical experiments, so that a broadly useful garment is best. It’s a beautifully created magic item.”

A part of me was impressed that Lorraine could tell that much at a distance, but alchemy was her specialty. As for me, I just vaguely felt some mana from it. I couldn’t see the flow of magic or understand the configuration of the magic circles like Lorraine could. Still, there was plenty I could tell despite my lack of knowledge. For example, the uniform looked like it could withstand magic. The fabric would probably resist any weapon strikes too.

“How much do you figure it costs?” I asked.

“Let’s see. At that level, about fifty gold pieces. If you wanted a similar level of protection, it’d be cheaper to buy an ordinary set of armor.”

“Fifty gold pieces?” Rina’s jaw dropped.

That was a large sum. You could stay at a cheap inn for about two years with that amount. I could afford it now, but I didn’t think I could bring myself to buy a set. My current robes were really high quality, and I didn’t need anything like that. If I didn’t have my robe, though, I might have thought differently. It’d be a pain to put on and take off armor every time I went out to walk around the city. In that sense, robes were much easier. They were light too. But if I were to buy that uniform, I’d be an impudent man masquerading as an Academy student.

It was actually fairly common for men to dress like knights despite not being one, or for women to dress like nuns at the tavern even though they weren’t nuns. I’d be the same as those people. They were also more revealing than the real thing. Well, they were just having fun. Depending on the situation, real knights or nuns might come by and arrest or report them. That all depended on the judgment of the tavern owner, though.

“Now, as for the ado... Ah.”

I turn my attention back to the boy and the merchant.

“How will you deal with my robe?!” The boy said to the middle-aged man.

The man was at a loss. He looked a bit exasperated as he said, “What do you mean how will I deal with it? I just bumped up against you. I already apologized for that. Are you going to ask that I pay you because it’s dirty?”

“No, not because it’s dirty. Because you broke it. You might not know, but this is an Academy uniform! It’s a fine piece of craftsmanship with high-quality magic enhancements. But you—”

“High-quality magic enhancements? There’s no way that would break from a little bump. Maybe you got a lemon?”

“How dare you!”

The argument quickly escalated, and an audience started to gather.

While Maalt was a relatively peaceful city, squabbles were common. Adventurers were more well-behaved here compared to other cities, but they were still ruffians at heart. Arguments and fights happened somewhere in Maalt every day. And when those broke out, spectators would gather and egg the participants on while placing bets on the outcome.

This encounter between the boy and the middle-aged man was about to escalate into that sort of public spectacle, however...

“Excuse me! Let me through!”

A young woman pushed through the gathering crowd and forced her way to the center. She was also dressed in an Academy uniform, making it clear that she was a student there. Did that mean she was here to help the boy?

Many Academy students could use magic. While you could gain admission without that ability, it was easier to do so if you could use magic. Among families rich enough to pay for the tuition, it was relatively common for children to have an aptitude for magic.

Two Academy students were a fairly big threat, at least to the poor middle-aged merchant. It went without saying that mages were dangerous. They could engulf a person in flame with just a short incantation. This situation might require some outside intervention.

Everyone around us seemed to be arriving at the same conclusion. However, the young woman surprised us all.

“Noel. Noel Kruege! Stop picking fights with civilians! You’re damaging the reputation of the entire Academy!” she yelled.



Unlike the boy, who was openly arrogant, the girl seemed much more stoic and serious. The accessories she wore in addition to her robes, like the earrings dangling on her ears and the thin wristband peeking out from her sleeve, indicated that she was from a wealthy family.

“It must be nice to be rich, to wear such exquisite things,” Lorraine said after a brief glance at the girl’s jewelry. “Her earrings enhance mana, and the wristband increases magic defenses. They’re not just functional additions either; they’re finely crafted, beautifully designed accessories. Is she a noble, perhaps?”

“Most of the Academy’s students are nobles, so that’s not really unusual,” I said.

In general, adventurers steadily saved up money so they could replace their equipment with better versions. Nobles, however, didn’t need to do that. They could afford to start out with high-quality equipment. Still, a lot of items required a certain level of skill to use, so often their possessions were more fancy than functional.

On the other hand, powerful mana-enhancing items were useless—not to mention dangerous—to an inexperienced mage. It was like giving a weak swordsman a heavy greatsword. A novice mage could easily lose control of their magic and die in an accident. Furthermore, if you wore too many items that influenced the flow of mana, they could end up interfering with each other, and you’d end up in a bad way. The fact that the girl was wearing robes, earrings, and a wristband meant that she was at least competent enough to balance all three without any issues.

There was a time when Lorraine had worn magic rings on all of her fingers and toes, five earrings in each ear, ten layers of robes, and five hats stacked on her head. Of course, the first spell she cast in that state had caused a huge

explosion. Though she'd failed spectacularly, she had managed to control all of those items for the better part of thirty seconds. It had taken a ridiculous amount of effort to do so, so whether it would be useful in actual combat was debatable. Maybe it would work in situations that required a lot of firepower for only a split second.

In any case, it was unfair to the girl to compare her to a mad scholar like Lorraine.

Lorraine and I were casually chatting when I noticed that Rina had fallen oddly quiet. I looked to the side and found her staring intently at the boy and girl from the Academy with a look of shock.

It was unusual for Rina to look so surprised. After all, she wasn't a shrinking violet. She had calmly accepted me when I was just a pile of bones, and she'd even figured out a way to sneak me into the city. It was hard to startle her. Granted, she was always more expressive than Lorraine or me, so in a way, she was often surprised at one thing or another, but it was rare to see her stunned into silence.

"Rina, what is it?" I asked.

Rina snapped back into awareness, but she kept her eyes on the boy and girl as she exclaimed, "The girl! She's the friend I was talking about earlier!"



"Stay out of this, Elise Georges," the boy said. "I'm busy speaking to this merchant. I've no time to deal with you right now."

Based on what they'd said to each other so far, I gathered that the boy's name was Noel, and the girl was Elise.

Annoyed, Noel looked at Elise and waved his hand as though to shoo her away. Elise's eyes narrowed, and she glared at him sharply.

"You...!"



I felt mana flowing into Elise's body. She wasn't preparing to cast a spell, though. It was just a natural response triggered by her emotional state. Since emotions could affect the strength of your mana and the timing of your spell, experienced mages trained themselves to avoid that. Elise was probably still just an apprentice, then. Though she was skilled, it was understandable that she couldn't control it.

As we watched the boy and girl bicker, Lorraine rubbed her chin and muttered, "Rina's friend, hm? Then this is a bad situation."

"Really?" I asked. "I mean, whatever's happening, they're not going to start flinging spells at each other here. And even if they did, we could deal with it."

Firing powerful spells in the middle of a city was prohibited. In Yaaran and most other countries, that was the law. There were the occasional exceptions, but I was hoping that they wouldn't be so reckless as to start a magic fight here. Besides, I was pretty sure the Academy took pride in the intelligence and propriety of their students.

But then again, squabbles among adventurers were a common occurrence, and they were often allowed to escalate to the point that the city guard had to step in. So unless they did something like destroy city property or injure a bunch of innocent bystanders, fighting was rarely treated like a major crime. Because of that, adventurers had no qualms about skirmishing with each other. It wasn't that they ignored the law, but they were only concerned with the bare minimums required to live in society. That was why everyone treated adventurers like uncouth ruffians.

Based on that, even if Noel and Elise began firing spells here, they probably wouldn't get into much trouble themselves. It would endanger the spectators, but Lorraine could throw up a magic barrier or something. Plus, I'd already looked to see if there were other mages around. There were a few mage adventurers nearby, so they would likely intervene as well. I didn't think it was a particularly dangerous situation.

Yet Lorraine shook her head and said, "The academy children are one thing. But look at what the merchant has on his hip."

"Oh, that's from the Ariana Maritime Republic. So that's where the

merchant's from."

There was a dagger hanging from the merchant's belt. Judging from its size and design, it wasn't meant for combat, but rather for show. Two clearly visible crests had been carved into the hilt. I'd seen one of them before. It was the crest of the Ariana Maritime Republic. The design consisted of a sea dragon constricting a giant octopus in the open ocean.

The Ariana Maritime Republic was a coastal country that prospered primarily from sea trade. Consequently, a number of its citizens were merchants, which was why they could be found in nearly every country on the continent. I wasn't sure why that was an issue right now, though.

"The other crest shows that he belongs to the Ariana Merchant's Guild," Lorraine explained. "Those daggers are only given to those with a certain amount of stature in the guild. Getting into a spat with him could be dangerous. And they're strangers, so we could just leave them to their conflict, but..."

The Ariana Merchant's Guild had a reputation for doing anything to make money. They employed a large number of powerful mercenaries and adventurers, and it was said that they even used assassins on occasion. It was a dangerous organization surrounded by nebulous facts and ominous rumors. They weren't a problem if you dealt with them according to the normal rules of society, but fighting them required a certain level of commitment.

Lorraine had meant that it was extremely risky to inadvertently start a fight with them, even in ignorance. But since Rina's friend was now involved, she was also saying we couldn't simply ignore it.

"Isn't it a bit dicey to intervene after this much squabbling?" I pointed out.

I wouldn't mind stepping in, but it didn't look like Noel and the merchant were exactly open to making peace. We'd possibly just cause more trouble and end up in the feud ourselves.

"I think we should be fine. I noticed something when I looked at the boy's robes. But this is the important question. Rina, would you prefer to help them?"

Rina nodded intently and answered, "Yes, if it's possible. Would that be okay?"



“Calm yourself, Elise. Surely you’re not planning to start firing spells in a space like this.”

Noel, who looked to be around ten, had unexpectedly attempted to warn Elise. However, his tone and attitude had made him sound extremely arrogant, so his words had been counterproductive.

When Elise showed no signs of backing down, Noel tried again, saying, “Don’t you understand I’m trying to stop you from fighting just minutes after your arrival in Maalt?! The dean was quite insistent that we behave ourselves, and yet you...”

It was fortunate that nothing of importance had happened yet. Maybe they had more restraint than I’d thought? Nonetheless, it didn’t change the fact that they were currently the center of attention. Perhaps they weren’t that concerned about the gathering crowd because they were nobles. I, a mere commoner, could never think like that.

While I was pondering the attitudes of nobles, Lorraine pushed through the throng and made her way to the front, facing the merchant and the two Academy students. She could have just blasted the people out of her way with magic, but that would’ve just poured fuel on the fire. She was being considerate by not doing so.

“You lot, hold on a moment,” she said as the three of them looked at her suspiciously.

It was just like Lorraine to remain calm even when she was an outsider suddenly appearing in the middle of an argument.

“Who are you? A Maaltesian?” Elise asked.

“Yes.”

“Then why are you interfering? I’m sure you can see that we are from the Academy.”

Elise was implying that since most of the Academy’s students were mages, and even those who weren’t had some fight training, it was extremely

dangerous for an ordinary civilian to involve themselves. She was looking out for Lorraine's safety. Naturally, she need not have worried. Lorraine was fine.

"I understand that," Lorraine continued, "so don't let me bother you. I'm here for you."

Lorraine approached Noel. Noel tried to back away, but Lorraine was too quick for him. She reached out and touched his robes. I figured Noel would say something, but he unexpectedly remained quiet. Even Elise looked stunned by his reaction.

Lorraine spent a few moments observing Noel's robes, then said, "As I thought. Your claims are correct."

In a whisper, Rina asked me, "Wait, he was telling the truth? So the merchant really did damage his robes?"

"Lorraine did mention earlier that she'd noticed something. She must have been referring to the boy's robes. But huh, I didn't notice they were damaged. I can feel the enhancements are still active."

I couldn't see mana like Lorraine could, but I could vaguely tell when a spell was activated or what its effect might be. My senses told me that there was still magic on the boy's robes. Now that I thought about it, though, it was a little weaker than the girl's robes. Maybe? No, not weaker...

"Wait, what do you mean? How can you tell?" Elise asked. She was just as bewildered as Rina and I were.

"I may not look the part, but I'm an alchemist. It would be one thing if I only glanced from a distance, but now that I've touched and inspected his robes, it's easy enough to see."

Lorraine already knew because she could literally see mana with her magic eye. Saying that in public would only complicate things, though, so she'd made up a plausible excuse. I was the only one here who knew the truth.

"An alchemist? Then what Noel was saying..."

"He was right. Meaning, in this case, you're the one who's picking a fight. It's understandable, though, given the circumstances. Surely you could have

phrased things more tactfully, young man?”

Though he had let Lorraine have her way with his robes, Noel suddenly regained his arrogant attitude. He yanked his robes out of Lorraine’s grasp, saying, “Your advice is unnecessary. I was simply stating the truth.”

Lorraine sighed and shook her head.

I was hoping that would be the end of it, but things were never that easy. Though Lorraine had gotten Noel and Elise on the same page, she hadn’t solved the actual cause of the ruckus.

“W-Wait, hang on!” the merchant yelled. “Does that mean it’s my fault?! Come now. You can’t just barge in and make accusations like that!”

The fact that Noel was right meant that the merchant was in the wrong. If he really hadn’t done anything to Noel’s robes, then that would be an insulting accusation.

Lorraine casually walked over to the merchant and murmured something in his ear. All the emotion on his face fell in a heartbeat and he went white as a sheet. After a few seconds, he nodded, his whole body trembling.

“So, what are you going to do?” Lorraine asked for emphasis.

“I-I’ll send restitution to the Academy for the damages later. I-I’m truly sorry to trouble you,” the merchant said, much to everyone’s surprise.

Lorraine turned back to Noel. “And you?” she asked, as if nudging him.

Noel’s brow furrowed, and he looked as though he’d bitten into a particularly bitter fruit, but then he appeared to swallow whatever he was going to say.

“That’s fine with me. The dean was adamant that we behave in a manner befitting an Academy student while in Maalt.”

Lorraine then turned to Elise, prompting her to respond as well.

“I don’t have anything to add. Oh, but one thing, Noel. I was wrong. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Hrmph. Elise Georges, if you want to buy me something, then first raise your grades. Also, learn to judge the strength of someone in front of you. Now, if

you'll excuse me."

Noel left the carriage stop. The tension in the air dissipated, and the spectators dispersed. The only ones left were Rina, Lorraine, Elise, and me. The merchant had wandered off as well.

Now that the area was somewhat deserted, Elise finally noticed Rina and cried out, "Rina?! What are you doing here?!"



"Ah, so that's why you're here," Elise said, sighing. "So these two are your mentors?"

We were now relaxing at a café in a different part of Maalt. Rina's former classmate, Elise Georges, had joined us as well.

Rina had taken a few liberties with her explanation. Specifically, she had omitted that she'd run into a mysterious skeleton, that she almost ended up a dungeon master, and that she was no longer human. It wasn't like she was lying, though.

"Yeah," Rina answered. "I came here from the capital, and things weren't going well. But after Rentt here saved me in the dungeon, I finally started learning how to take care of myself. Miss Lorraine is an amazing mage, and I plan to start learning magic from her soon."

Rina hadn't expressed an interest in magic before, but she had learned to use Division. We'd decided that it might be good for her to learn more about magic and be able to use it to some extent. If someone were to see her use a vampiric ability, then she could pass it off as a spell. To do that, though, she needed to understand what magic could and couldn't do.

Magic couldn't replicate the effects of Division, but since it could cast shadows and the like, it was a plausible excuse. If someone were to then mention that they hadn't sensed any mana, she'd have to say that she was really good at hiding it. It wasn't a great explanation, but it was adequate enough. Rina would conceal her vampiric abilities as much as possible, but it was good to be prepared for that eventuality.

"Huh. So you're a mage," Elise commented. "That's why you were so

unflappable when you approached us. And Noel said something about learning to recognize how strong a person is... Oh, does that mean you're a really powerful mage, Miss Lorraine?"

Lorraine tilted her head. "No, not really. I'm mostly a scholar. I only practice magic in my free time."

I wanted to yell "Liar!" but it was true that she was a scholar first and a mage second. The issue was with her remark about how she wasn't that powerful. Well, I supposed she was just being modest.

In truth, it wasn't all that easy to tell at a glance how strong a mage was. If they were to unleash their mana and let it flow out of them like an aura, I'd be able to feel how intimidating they were, but no one with any skill would do something so obvious. Now, there were times when a mage might do that to scare their foe off, but most mages usually hid the extent of their mana reserves. Lorraine always concealed her mana. It was a lot safer for her that way.

Elise also knew that mages often hid their mana, so she looked at Lorraine skeptically. "Really? But if not, Noel wouldn't have said that."

"Oh, yes, that boy. It's clear you two don't get along, but is there some cause for the rift?" Lorraine asked, immediately changing the subject.

"Rift? It's not really that serious. We're always fighting for the top scores at the Academy. It's just that our rivalry kept escalating and our relationship ended up like this. Sadly, I've never been able to beat him."

"So he's an extremely good student despite his age."

"Yes, that's certainly true, but... He tends to look down on people, just a little bit, so incidents like what happened earlier are a pretty regular occurrence."

"A little bit"? I couldn't be the only one who wanted to interject. But Lorraine and I were mature enough to refrain from saying what we were thinking.

Rina, on the other hand, had no such compunctions. "That wasn't 'a little bit' at all! He was *really* rude!"

Rina was probably being so direct because she was mad that he had talked

down to Elise. He had sounded like he was arrogantly taunting her, but depending on how you interpreted his statement, it also sounded like he begrudgingly respected Elise's skills. At the very least, he seemed to accept that Elise was the most capable after him. However, there was still a part of Rina that could be a little childish, so she was more likely to focus on the backhanded part more than the compliment part.

"Well, sure," Elise agreed, "but usually there's more logic behind his complaints. Which is why I was surprised he was yelling at a merchant. Oh, that reminds me. What actually happened, Miss Lorraine? I couldn't make heads or tails of it."

"Oh, yes, of course. As for that... The merchant had twisted the magic on Noel's robes. As a result, the robes were less effective. That's all it was."

We already knew that. That was what Noel had been accusing the merchant of doing in the first place. What I wanted to know was the cause.

"But the robes are specially crafted at the Academy," Elise added. "First-class artisans did everything from the design to the materials, including the needlework and the enchantments. They're not easily damaged. It would be one thing if the robes had faced off against a monster, but all the merchant did was run into Noel. There was nothing that looked like it would do that sort of damage."

She was right. Besides, just because the merchant was in the upper echelons of the Ariana Merchant's Guild, it didn't mean he was particularly skilled in combat. There was no way he could have done as much damage as a monster could just by bumping into Noel. Furthermore, Noel was a mage from the Academy. Of the two of them, Noel and his robes were stronger.

It'd be terrifying if merchants were that strong. Then again, there were blacksmiths who gathered the materials for their own weapons, and herbalists who wandered into dangerous places to find medicinal herbs.

While the merchant had looked like he had a good head on his shoulders, he was just a portly little man. Nevertheless, Lorraine was claiming that the portly little man had damaged an Academy mage's robes. Just what was going on?

"Yes, ordinarily that wouldn't happen. But...it's different if you have

something like this.”

Lorraine retrieved an item from her bag and dropped it, with a thud, on the table.



Lorraine had placed a small dagger on the table. It was more ornamental than functional, and it had extremely intricate crests carved into its hilt. It was different from the dagger the merchant had been carrying as a mark of his rank in the Ariana Merchant’s Guild.

“Looks expensive,” I murmured out of habit.

Lorraine looked at me with a touch of exasperation. “You can easily afford something like this now. But...I don’t know if you could buy one of these. Besides, they’re not sold in these parts,” she noted, her words layered with meaning.

“What does that...?”

I tilted my head and looked at the dagger. But when I tried to touch it, I felt an extremely unpleasant sensation run up my arm. I immediately let go of it.

“What the hell is this?”

My reaction piqued Elise’s curiosity, and she politely said, “Excuse me,” and reached over to pick it up herself. Lorraine grabbed her wrist to stop her.

“You shouldn’t touch it.”

“Huh? Why?”

Lorraine gestured toward me. “He and I have built up some resistance to this sort of thing. If someone who doesn’t have any resistance touches it, there could be unpleasant side effects. The merchant had it wrapped in this.”

Lorraine pulled a folded cloth from her bag.

“I see,” I said, nodding. “A cloth imbued with divinity. So this dagger is...”

“Yes, this is a cursed item. It’s actually a crime to bring one into Maalt.”

Cursed items were known by various names, like “cursed goods,” “demon’s tools,” and “shadow objects,” but they all referred to a specific type of item,

like my mask. Technically, it was more of a divine item, so it wasn't really the same thing, but I'd definitely thought it was cursed at first. After all, it wouldn't come off. But then again, that had come in handy. I didn't have to come up with excuses for why I didn't show my face.

"A cursed item?! This? It's the first time I've seen one, but I can't tell by looking at it," Elise said as she stared wide-eyed at the dagger.

I found that a bit surprising.

So did Lorraine, because she said, "I would have expected the Academy to have them by the dozen in their stores."

The Academy was an educational institution, but it was also a research facility. Their studies ran the gamut from standard academic subjects to all matters involving magic. That included cursed items, so there should have been specialists in the field. They technically fell under the broad rubric of magic items, but their effects completely ignored the laws of magic. Analyzing and understanding how they functioned was an important field of study.

"Even for the Academy, powerful cursed items are generally considered precious," Elise explained. "They're not lying around for anyone to find. I've heard that the Tower has a number of them, but they're supposedly stored under very close watch. A mere student couldn't get access to them."

"So that's how it is in Yaaran's Academy. I see. Then, in that case, this would be a valuable experience for you. Since you're here, would you like to touch it?"

"Lorraine, didn't you just tell her not to touch it? Are you sure?" I asked.

"It's fine, but not inside the city, as I don't know what might happen. I'm certainly not proposing she just grab it here. But Elise will be in Maalt for a while. If our schedules allow, I'm happy to provide a location and an opportunity to do so. What do you say?"

It was a scary-sounding proposal, but since Lorraine had offered, there probably wasn't a lot of danger involved. I mean, there were a wide variety of cursed items. Ones like my mask, with no way to nullify their effects, were in the minority, and most were weak enough that church saints could cleanse them. Certain countries even treated the weaker ones like regular magic items.

This dagger must have been around that level, or Lorraine wouldn't have suggested it. Anyway, it was weak enough that a divinity-infused cloth worked as a shield.

Elise pondered Lorraine's proposal for a moment, but her nature as an Academy student won out. With a determined look, she said, "I would very much like the opportunity. As for my schedule, I won't know the details until I check, but once I'm certain of it, I'll contact you." She wasn't going to let such a valuable learning opportunity go to waste.

Lorraine nodded and gave Elise her contact information.

According to Elise, the Academy students were renting out a large inn here in Maalt. The Tower's people would be joining them, but sheesh, they really didn't stint on these things, did they? Well, an inn in a backwater city didn't cost all that much to rent.

As it came time to part, Elise and Rina exchanged hugs and promised to occasionally go out for a meal while Elise was in town.

As we watched their exchange, I asked Lorraine, "So, is it safe to assume that the dagger was what damaged those robes?" While it still sent an unpleasant shiver up my arm when I held it, I'd grown used to it by this point.

"Yes. It probably disrupts the mana flow in nearby objects. Magic items usually have a shield to prevent that, but this is strong enough to bypass that shield. It's not easy to recreate that effect with our current technology."

"But it's not impossible?"

"Of course not. I can think of several potential methods. The Academy's robes were designed to withstand those existing methods, yet they did nothing against this dagger. That's what makes a cursed item a cursed item. If I could figure out how it works, it'd be worth a small fortune, but it doesn't seem promising."

Lorraine had the magic eye, so it wasn't that hard for her to figure out the mechanics behind an ordinary magic item. Cursed items were in a category of their own, though.

"So why can you and I hold this and not be affected?" I asked.

“We were blessed by the god of the shrine you restored. It’s basically the same as holding it with that cloth. Rina might be all right if she borrows your divinity as well, but I couldn’t divulge that during our conversation.”

That made sense. If we had mentioned it in front of Elise, it would have raised the question of where Rina had acquired divinity. I would have to tell Rina a few things about this dagger later.

Side Story: Noel Kruege

Why must I deal with this after that torturously long journey from Vistelya to this backwater place? Noel Kruege, the presumptive valedictorian, wondered as he checked his robes. A merchant from some foreign country was currently trying to shuffle away from him.

The moment Noel bumped into that merchant, he'd heard an earsplitting ring, as though something had disrupted the magic woven into his robes. When he'd looked down to check, he'd noticed that while his robes were still working, the magic enhancements were now severely weakened.

As a student at the Academy, Noel knew that talented artisans had crafted the school robes, and therefore they weren't easily damaged. However, the fact remained that something had damaged them. They had been perfectly fine until he'd arrived in Maalt, and the only thing out of the ordinary that had happened since then was his brief encounter with the merchant. He'd then logically concluded that the merchant had been the cause of the sudden diminution in his robe's power.

Usually, Noel would have gone to one of the Academy's faculty members so that they could pursue this. Even if he'd needed to stop the merchant until a faculty member could intervene, he liked to think that he could have dealt with it peacefully. Unfortunately, this time, his self-control had failed him. He'd gotten into an argument with the merchant, and it had caught the attention of those nearby.

Noel realized that he'd mishandled things. He was continually reminded that he sounded rather arrogant and was often warned to watch his tone. Because of that, he had been working on controlling his actions and softening his speech when in public. Sadly, the reason things had spiraled out of control now was probably because the last few days had been particularly stressful—not that it was an acceptable excuse.

For the time being, Noel decided to stand his ground. Noel knew that the

merchant was well aware that he was at fault based on just how vociferously he'd objected. An ordinary person, a commoner who only dealt with merchants in market stalls or in stores, might not have noticed the difference, but Noel came from a respectable noble house, one equivalent to the rank of a count. The present state of the family was nothing to be particularly proud of, but they were an accomplished family that, in its heyday, had even produced ministers of state.

Because of their status, his family had done and still did a lot of business with merchant houses. They personally negotiated with said merchants, and Noel had frequently attended their meetings. He'd never been involved in any of the transactions himself, but as the heir to the title, he'd observed them so that he could learn to deal with merchants and gain some familiarity with their representatives.

That was why, despite his young age, Noel was somewhat familiar with how merchants acted. And based on his knowledge, Noel had decided that there was something particularly suspicious about this one. He still hadn't figured out the details, though. How had the merchant damaged the enchantments on his robes? He was at a loss.

It hadn't been his intent, but Noel had drawn the merchant's ire. Noel had hoped that if he taunted him, he might let something slip, but the merchant was too canny to fall for such an obvious ploy. Instead, they had reached a stalemate.

Noel knew he could still withdraw and instead issue a formal protest through the Academy. The Academy had enough authority to deal with this and would accept his claims once they checked his robes. But Noel had a feeling, perhaps intuition, that if he were to choose that route, they would never find the merchant again.

As Noel weighed his options, a young woman suddenly appeared from the assembled crowd. It was Elise Georges. Next to Noel, she was one of the most promising students at the Academy. Her personality could be slightly abrasive, though. She was the type to act on her own sense of right and wrong. He wouldn't go so far as to say that she was wrong to do so, but in this situation, she would only complicate things.

Unfortunately, his premonition came true. What had been an argument between him and the merchant became an argument between him and Elise.

While they were bickering, Noel glanced at the merchant. He was eyeing the crowd, looking for an opening to escape. Noel could tell that the instant he looked away, the merchant would make a run for it.

Noel felt vindicated. Clearly, the merchant felt self-conscious about something. But what was it, exactly? Noel suspected that it had something to do with the damage to his robes, but he didn't have any more details than that. His argument with Elise had bought him some time to consider what the merchant was concealing, but at this rate...

That was when another person pushed their way through the crowd and quickly put a stop to Noel and Elise's squabble.

Who is she? Noel wondered. No doubt Elise was thinking the same thing.

Even though Noel didn't know the woman, he could tell at a glance that she was a powerful mage. Her mana was sharply refined, and her magic was clean and efficient. Noel was still an apprentice at the Academy, so his skill was on par with an average, or perhaps below-average mage. An average mage might not have understood what they were looking at, but Noel could tell that she had spells ready to unleash at a moment's notice. However, the only reason he knew that she was unusually skilled was because she had a similar air to his former tutor.

Before he joined the Academy, Noel had studied with a high-ranking mage from the empire. Whenever Noel tried to skip a lesson, the old man would assume that same air and intimidate Noel. If Noel continued to resist, he would laugh and casually launch a spell at him. The only spells that ever hit him were water spells that at most left a bruise; anything else had either dispelled before it hit him or missed him completely. But Noel could still remember the sheer fear he'd felt. He'd known that the old man could have easily snuffed him out like a candle if he'd so desired.

Noel didn't particularly want to remember that feeling, but unfortunately for him, this woman had the exact same aura as that old man. He couldn't move a muscle or even squeak out a protest when she encroached on his personal

space and grabbed his robes.



This unexpected development ended up working in Noel's favor. The woman who'd appeared out of nowhere noticed the damage to his robes after only a brief inspection and made the merchant admit his guilt. She breezily accomplished everything Noel had been hoping to achieve.

Noel had thought that Maalt was a primitive frontier city and therefore would be lacking in notable people, but it seemed his assumption had been wrong. He had a list of questions he wanted to ask the mage, but mages in general were secretive. He suspected that if he were to ask, he wouldn't learn anything of value in such a public space.

Furthermore, since the mage had just asked him whether the matter was settled, he decided it would be best to leave it at that. The sooner they resolved this, the sooner the crowd would disperse, leaving little sign that anything had happened at all. He'd had his fair share of public tiffs at the Academy, so he knew this from experience. He'd never unfairly criticized anyone, but due to his tone, his title, and his grades, he often looked at fault. Once he'd realized that, he'd been careful to avoid any conflict in general, but he'd made a mistake this time.

The mage then asked Elise whether she thought the matter was settled. Elise just nodded, then immediately apologized. She insisted that she was going to make it up to him. It was perfectly in character given her sense of responsibility.

Noel understood why Elise had been skeptical about his accusations against the merchant. As she had noted, the dean of the Academy had warned them not to dishonor the school with their behavior. Noel didn't think he'd done anything wrong, but he understood how the argument must have looked to Elise.

Noel decided that he would accept her apology but insist that she had nothing to make up for. He opened his mouth to say as much, but then he realized that he was still immature and had a lot of growing left to do. Instead, the words that came out of his mouth reeked of sarcasm, and he could see from Elise's expression that he was irritating her.

The presumptive salutorian was smart enough to recognize that she was at fault, so she didn't respond to his goading and instead merely glared a bit sharply at him.

If Noel were to interpret the message behind that glare, it would have been something like "I'll show you someday." or something similar. Of course, the deciding factor wasn't a magic duel to the death, but a race to graduate with the top grades in the Academy. It was a perfectly healthy rivalry for students.

It went without saying that Noel had no intention of losing, but he acknowledged that Elise's recent academic improvements were impressive. He'd had an advantage because he'd studied with a tutor before starting at the Academy, but Elise was quickly closing that gap. He needed to stay focused or she might overtake him. And he had things he needed to do in Maalt in order to maintain his lead.

Thinking about the work to come, Noel made his way to the inn that the Academy had rented out.



"Noel Kruege. I've heard about what happened at the carriage stop."

The second Noel arrived at the inn, Adelina Moska, one of the Academy professors who'd come to investigate Maalt's new dungeon, greeted him. He thought she had an annoyingly keen sense of hearing, but the argument had drawn a large crowd. And since other students had been there too, it would have been strange if she hadn't heard.

Noel didn't argue and simply explained what had happened. Adelina's expression, which had been rigid when he'd started, gradually softened.

Her facial features had always been somewhat harsh, and most people described her general demeanor as icy. She still looked far from gentle even with her usual expression, so she was the perfect professor to lead the students for this outing. None were willing to disobey her instructions or talk back to her face. She was also one of the most skilled mages among the Academy faculty. Students stood little chance against her if she decided to drop the hammer on them.

“I see. I understand what happened now. If that was the case, then it was wrong of me to chastise you. However, in future situations of this sort, don’t try to deal with things on your own and instead contact the faculty first. That would be the best solution.”

“I did consider that option,” Noel said, “but there was something...suspicious about the merchant’s behavior. I was concerned that he would escape. That’s why I decided that confronting him myself was the better choice.”

Adelina shook her head. “There would’ve been nothing wrong with letting him escape.”

“Huh?”

“Noel, the most important thing to consider is your personal safety. If that merchant had powerful people backing him, then not even you, the heir to a countship, could emerge from such a conflict unscathed. If that is the alternative to letting him get away, then it is better to simply let him go. I understand that while you aren’t quite as...stubborn as Elise when it comes to ethics, you would still find it difficult to make that choice. But remember, you are still a student. While you are at the Academy, it is the faculty’s job to protect you. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“That... Yes, I do.”

Noel was a bit irritated that she’d just compared him to Elise, but he realized that his need for justice had been the driving force behind his behavior. He’d acted that way because he’d felt that something had to be done about the merchants. But after Adelina pointed out that simply letting him go was an option, Noel acknowledged that she was right.

“Then, that’s all I ask. I shall end my lecture here. Although, as members of the Academy, we need to officially thank the mage who helped you.”

“I didn’t get an opportunity to ask her name or her address.”

“I see. But since she was so skilled a mage that you felt you couldn’t afford to disobey her, I’m sure she’ll turn up with a bit of digging. Now, Noel, go and get some rest. We start the survey of the dungeon tomorrow. Don’t forget to prepare with the other students in your team.”

Her lecture now over, Adelina returned to the inn's lobby. That was where she'd been waiting for Noel.

Since you could see anyone who entered the inn from the lobby, the Academy professors were taking shifts there to wait for the students to arrive. They were probably also waiting to chastise the students who'd misbehaved in one way or another—like Noel.

As Noel made his way to his assigned room, he felt a faint sense of satisfaction that Elise would be next to face that trial. Perhaps he had a slightly twisted personality.



“Ah, there you are, my friend!”

The click of the opening door brought with it the exaggerated welcome from his Academy classmate, Pierpaolo Blanca. He had been assigned to be Noel's roommate for this outing.

Those encountering Pierpaolo for the first time found him to be an odd lanky young man with a grandiose attitude bordering on insolence. Noel had thought the same thing when he'd first met him, but by now, he had long since grown accustomed to Pierpaolo's quirks.

Though Pierpaolo's appearance wouldn't suggest it, his father was a noble with a proper title. The Blanca family, a viscount family, were wealthy and engaged in the mercantile trade. Pierpaolo was the eldest son, and while he wasn't as skilled as Noel or Elise, he was one of the better students at the Academy.

Since he came from a noble family, Pierpaolo would one day inherit his family's title. Noel found it a bit odd that one day he would be a fellow noble, but most nobles were eccentric in their own way. Yaaran nobles in particular were known to be more bizarre than their counterparts elsewhere.

With an exasperated sigh, Noel asked, “So? How go your efforts? Does it seem like things will proceed smoothly?”

Pierpaolo nodded vigorously. “Looks like we'll get by. For people like us to get into a dungeon, we first need to secure some adventurers. We can use magic

ourselves, but our strength and precision is nothing compared to those who earn their daily bread by dungeon diving. Besides, we're not here to fight. We need to do what we can to avoid wasting our energy. Isn't that right, brother?"

"Yes. This will impact our grades at the Academy. I can't afford to lose to Elise."

"Mm? Did something happen?" Pierpaolo asked with a tilt of his head. Evidently, he'd found the sudden hint of enthusiasm in Noel's tone noteworthy.

Noel decided to explain what had happened at the carriage stop. Once he finished, Pierpaolo held his stomach and burst into raucous laughter.

"Aha ha ha! First thing you do when you get here is that?! They were so insistent about not causing any problems, and yet there you are! Though, given the circumstances, I suppose you didn't have much choice. But huh, damaging robes just by touching them, eh?"

Noel pursed his lips and crossed his arms, but he didn't offer a single complaint. Pierpaolo was the rare Academy student who could speak to Noel without any hint of artifice, and Noel would simply listen. In short, he was Noel's only friend among his classmates.

Most people generally thought of Noel as someone who looked down on those who weren't particularly skilled. He'd never intended to treat people that way, but it was hard for him to change that perception now.

The only student who interacted with Noel as an equal was Pierpaolo. That wasn't because Noel was particularly modest or restrained around him. It was simply that Pierpaolo was so much more flamboyant and brazen than the other students. And in truth, Noel generally accepted Pierpaolo as an equal. Noel had better grades, but Pierpaolo had odd tidbits of information and a good nose for gossip. Or perhaps he had a sharper intuition. It was something that Noel knew he lacked, so he felt it was worthy of admiration.

"Can a skilled alchemist really see broken enchantments just by touching an object?" Pierpaolo asked, thinking about the mage Noel had mentioned.

Noel shook his head. "Whether she could, all of her observations were correct. She even got the merchant to apologize. He's going to pay for the

damages.”

“The merchant must have had something he wanted to hide. That’s fine. But the mage...”

“You’re that interested in her?” Noel asked.

“Well, she’s strong enough to frighten you, yeah?”

“I-I wasn’t scared of her!”

“You were totally scared. And she’s an alchemist who understood the composition of the Academy robes with a single glance, right? Seems a little convenient for someone that skilled to just happen to be where you were at.”

“You think there’s some sleight of hand involved here?”

That was impossible. The situation had been a complete accident, and there was no way anyone could have staged it in advance.

“No, that’s not what I meant. It’s just, what the hell is someone like that doing in this backwater town? I can’t think of any good reasons really.”

“So...she’s here to investigate the dungeon? From an organization other than the Tower or the Academy, I mean.”

“That’s what I figure,” Pierpaolo said, nodding. “She might even be from another country. That’s not something just limited to her either. Newly formed dungeons only come around maybe once every decade, or even once a century. We have no idea what sort of people are in this city. Best to watch yourself.”

Pierpaolo had only meant that they needed to be careful lest others who had come to investigate the dungeon steal their findings. And his point was valid. Nevertheless, since Noel owed that mage a debt, he decided to ignore Pierpaolo’s unfair suspicion.

“I understand what you’re saying, but she said she was a Maaltesian. Her presence was just a coincidence.”

“Really? Well, maybe I’m just being paranoid. After all, it’s a newly formed dungeon. It may very well have the discovery of the century inside it!”

Noel knew that Pierpaolo was joking. Even if there was something of that sort

to be found, one of the Academy faculty or a Tower researcher would find it. Students like Noel and Pierpaolo were essentially errand runners for those people, gathering small, detailed bits of information that might be floating around the city. Still, that didn't entirely eliminate the possibility that they'd find something.

"We'll have to trust in your luck for that. It seems I don't have much luck here," Noel muttered, prompting another fit of laughter from Pierpaolo.

Chapter 5: A Request from the Guild

“I suppose it’s time I get back to my actual job,” I said about three days after the incident at the carriage stop.

I’d been involved in the recent city-wide stir—now jokingly called the Great Maaltesian Riot or the Maaltesian Dungeon Affair—so for the past few days, I’d been recovering from the emotional exhaustion after all that ruckus. Physically, I felt fine. I still wasn’t sure how my body worked, but because I was undead, I never felt all that tired. Even so, I wanted to rest a little, which was why I’d been spending some time slacking off.

The thing was, I’d always been hardworking. Even when I was human, I never took any real vacations. So these three days of idleness were making me want to go out and do something. Not to mention, I was starting to feel weirdly guilty for not doing anything, even though no one was egging me on. Maybe I was just a workaholic. That was better than not working at all, right?

It wasn’t like I hadn’t done anything over the last three days. I had trained a little with Rina. I mean, active adventurers had to exercise some. If you didn’t do anything at all, it would take a few days for your body to readjust to fighting. Then again, did I really need to do that when I wasn’t human anymore? I honestly wasn’t sure whether my body had any human aspects like that left. Maybe I needed to test that out at some point.

“Your actual job? I’d say you did plenty of adventuring work during the recent events, so there isn’t any need for you to push yourself,” Lorraine said as she reached for her breakfast.

I supposed she was right. Since the guild was treating that whole incident as an emergency job, I technically was working the whole time.

“True, but the people from the Tower arrived yesterday, right? I want to check in and see what things are like at the guild. After all, I’m sure the people from the Tower intend to go dungeon diving.”

“Ah, true. People from the Tower will go to the guild looking for adventurers, like those from the Academy did. I’ve heard that things have been pretty hard there since the Academy arrived. Best to be cautious.”

“You think so?” I asked.

“Yes. The Academy’s entourage is primarily made up of students, so their focus is on keeping the students safe. They probably won’t be much of a concern, but the Tower is a different story. No matter what country they’re from, they focus on their research and nothing else. Not that I can criticize them for that. I’m not any different. But I’m sure there will be friction between them and adventurers.”

I had been worried about the same thing and had been thinking of visiting the guild. Both sides were made up of grown adults, so they wouldn’t just randomly fight. But hoping for no conflict at all was asking a bit much considering how different researchers and adventurers were.

Adventurers were generally rough and tumble sorts that had worked their way up the hierarchy through grit and sheer force. People from the Tower were, for better or for worse, the selected few who weren’t exactly used to dealing with ordinary society. That wasn’t true of everyone, but people did often conform to stereotypes. I was almost afraid to imagine what things were like at the guild right now.

“They won’t be dueling to the death or anything. Relax. It won’t be all that bad,” Lorraine said with a chuckle.



“What the hell?! You wanna repeat that?!”

“I shall say it as many times as necessary! You adventurers are at fault for our failed expedition yesterday! The guild told us you were dependable, but to end up like this? Our contract is terminated! Terminated!”

Angry shouts rang through the guild hall. It seemed a deadly brawl was about to break out at any second.

“This is...worse than expected,” I murmured almost as soon as I walked in the door.

Sheila noticed my arrival and wandered over.

“Not much to do about it. It’s been like this since the Tower people arrived. The ones yelling over there are equally at fault, so they’ll calm down eventually.”

“Are you sure we don’t need to stop them?” I asked, even though it was still just a verbal spat.

“Mostly...” Sheila said without much conviction.

We watched the argument for a while, and slowly the shouting match reached its conclusion.

“No, my apologies. I went too far. I was irate because we didn’t make much progress in our investigations. You did fine yesterday.”

“I went too far as well. It was our fault that one of you got hurt. Is he better now?”

“Yes. He’s received healing magic, so he should be fine after a day’s rest.”

Fortunately, the argument ended amicably.

“But if it’s like this every day,” I said, “it’s gotta be hard to deal with, right?”

Sheila nodded. “The guildmaster, in particular, has been rubbing his temples all week.”

“Wolf? Really?”

Running the guild in its current state would give anyone a headache. Not only did the employees have to deal with the various dungeon-related jobs, but they also had to handle all the requests from both the Tower and the Academy. As guildmaster, Wolf must have been working nonstop since I last saw him. He might work himself to death. Then he’d end up in the same boat as me. Maybe I could teach him how to handle being dead.

I caught sight of Wolf muttering to himself as he came down the stairs.

“Okay, so this...goes here, while this...”

He was holding countless sheets of paper and parchment and looked to be sorting through them as he walked. I wanted to tell him to go back to his desk

to do that, but I figured he was so busy that he didn't want the time he spent walking to go to waste.

Wolf suddenly turned his head from side to side, stretching his neck. His gaze settled on me. His eyes lit up...and I got a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.



"Yo, Rentt. It's only been a few days since I last saw you, but it feels like weeks."

Wolf was walking toward me with a smile on his face. He looked like a guildmaster who, despite his authority and importance, was taking time to ask after a lowly Bronze-class adventurer. However, under that facade, he was a predator that had finally found its prey. An air of intimidation emanated from him.

"I need to get back to work," Sheila said and left.

Evidently, she'd also noticed Wolf's predatory aura and immediately shuffled off to the safety of her own desk. I wanted to complain about how heartlessly she had abandoned me, but given that Wolf was her boss, she'd probably figured that if she stayed, she'd be forced to try and persuade me as well. If that was her reason for leaving, then perhaps she was being wise rather than heartless. No, she couldn't have been thinking that deeply about it.

"Maybe you're feeling that way because you've been staring at paperwork for so long," I suggested as I glanced at the huge stack of papers in Wolf's arms. "Still, you seem really busy."

"Yeah, well, the Tower and the Academy seem to think that the guild is their lackey. I've got a mountain of work towering over my desk as a result."

While local governments—the country or the regional lords—supervised the adventurer's guilds, they weren't government agencies. They were more like independent entities. Guilds had the potential to function as an armed organization operating on a global scale. That was why the local governments regulated them, to avoid that outcome. So while the guilds were supposed to be part of the same network, information was rarely shared internationally.

For example, if I were to take my adventurer's card to one of the adventurer's

guilds in the empire, the most that they would know about me would be what was written on my card. I was grateful for that since I had a lot of secrets, but no doubt it was a bother for the people running the guilds.

Wolf's complaint, in essence, was that they were treating him like some government employee when his organization wasn't even part of the government.

"Sorry about monopolizing you when you're so busy, oh great guildmaster. I'd hate to add to your load here, so I guess I'll go home for the day..."

I tried to turn and head for the exit, but a powerful arm grabbed me by the wrist. Its grip was so strong that not even I, with my monstrous physical strength, could easily resist. I was almost certain that Wolf had been lying about not being able to work as an adventurer anymore.

When I turned to look, it was Wolf holding my wrist. The paperwork he'd been cradling was now discarded on the floor. I could see the despair in the guild employees' faces as they appeared out of nowhere to gather and reorganize the jumbled pile. I wasn't sure if their expressions were from a resigned acceptance of Wolf's behavior or from the impact of their current schedule. It was probably both.

Wolf lips quirked into a frightening smile. "You're not expecting to enjoy a day off in these circumstances, are you, Rentt? Excuse me, guild employee Rentt Vivie."

He didn't need to explain why he had corrected himself. It was obvious. I figured it was pointless to resist, but I decided to try anyway.

"You're the one who promised I could turn you down when it was too much for me to handle," I reminded him. The reason I'd even agreed to become a guild employee was because Wolf had said he wouldn't force work on me.

Wolf briefly glanced at the guild employees around him before turning back to me. "Look at how overworked your coworkers are. Isn't this the time to show your mettle and volunteer to help out?"

When I looked around, all the employees looked at me either on the verge of tears or with a pleading expression. They were so in sync that I wanted to ask if

they were an acting troupe. They were making it very hard to say no.

“It’s because you’re so busy that you wouldn’t want someone like me, who’s not used to office work, coming in and disrupting your rhythm, right?”

I’d tossed that out with a hope and a prayer, but Wolf just smiled and said, “I see. Then I just need to give you a job you’re already used to doing. And I have just the job in mind.”

“How do you already have a job ready?”

“Oh no, it’s not that I had it waiting for you. It’s just something I’m having trouble with. If you can just take care of that, it’d make my life a whole lot easier. Think of it as helping out an old friend. Please?”

Wolf really did look like he was struggling with something. Not even I couldn’t bring myself to decline after that much pleading. Besides, I wasn’t all that busy, which was why I was here in the first place.

That wasn’t to say I had nothing to do at all. I needed to go to Vistelya at some point. I’d been waiting until everything had settled down a bit, but given the state of the city, I was sure that the longer I waited, the fewer opportunities I’d have. Lorraine and I would be fine if the trip was delayed, but it would be a big problem for Augurey, who was waiting there. Or maybe he was already dealing with complications from my absence.

I decided to leave that for later and said, “All right, all right. What do you need me to do?”

“Ah! That’s the spirit, Rentt. This isn’t the place to talk details, so come with me.”

Wolf’s expression changed in the blink of an eye, and he proceeded toward his office. So was all of that from earlier just an act? I was still stuck on that little detail and wanted to argue the point, but since I’d already accepted the job, I followed along in Wolf’s wake.



The moment we entered Wolf’s office, I immediately cut to the chase.

“What’s this special job of yours, exactly?”

I wanted to hear the details to put myself at ease. Since the job hadn't been made with me in mind, I didn't need to be guarded, but even if Wolf had been jesting, he had noted that it was perfectly suited for me. It was easy to deduce that it was an unpleasant job.

"Oh, don't be so impatient. First, you're aware of the guild's current state?"

"Yeah, it's obvious from a glance at the lobby."

"I figured. The reason things are like that down there is because we're connecting adventurers to the Tower and Academy people. Appearances aside, things are going pretty smoothly. They get the forces and guards they need for their expeditions, and we get to take money from the well-heeled capital snobs."

"You sound like a bandit," I commented.

Though he'd phrased it like that, it was safe to say that the Tower and the Academy were paying a lot better than a typical guild job. City folks could be arrogant and proud, so it required patience to work with them, but even their arrogance was bearable when you knew it was filling your wallet.

Since the cost of living was a lot higher in Vistelya, people were used to paying higher prices for things. They would hire adventurers at rates that felt average or low to them, but they were high to adventurers. The guild did explain to them that they were offering more than what was normal in Maalt, but the hiring parties didn't lower their rates.

The Tower and the Academy were both state-run institutions. Their budgets came from state coffers, and if they were to scrimp and save on costs, next year's budget might be reduced. That was part of the reason they still paid Vistelya prices even in Maalt. Furthermore, Maalt was short on manpower. It took relatively high rates to get adventurers to even consider taking a job.

All in all, thanks to the new dungeon, Maalt's economy was doing well. It would have been better if it had never appeared and no one had died in the aftermath, but it was a silver lining of sorts. Besides, Maaltesians didn't just take their lumps as they came; they always found some benefit from their hardships. To survive in this harsh world, you had to continually look forward. People on the frontier were usually better at that than those from the core

areas of the kingdom.

“We were able to find adventurers for most of the Tower and Academy requests,” Wolf explained, “but since we’re a lot busier than normal, we still don’t have enough people to go around. So we’re processing a handful of requests using guild employees.”

It was uncommon for guild employees to take requests, but it had been done in the past, usually when there wasn’t enough manpower to cover all the demand. The basic jobs like herb gathering went on the back burner when things got busy like they were now. Everyone wanted the higher pay while it was on the table.

Once people had finished with the higher-paying jobs, they’d eventually take care of the low-priority jobs. The guild would just leave those jobs for later, but if doing so would have unwanted side effects down the road, the guild would send its personnel to take care of them. How far the guild went to handle those matters depended on the guildmaster and the guild branch itself. Wolf was the type to monitor that sort of thing and make sure it was taken care of.

By this point, I had a good idea of what Wolf was going to ask me to do.

“So you want me to handle the jobs left hanging? I mean, I don’t mind, since I’m good at those sorts of tasks.”

Before I became undead, I prioritized jobs like that. Once you were used to them, they were actually fairly profitable relative to the amount of effort they required. Since I’d spent ten years doing them, I could deal with them much faster than the average adventurer. Besides, even the simplest errands and odd jobs brought in silver pieces.

I sometimes wondered why no one else worked that way, but anyone who had been adventuring for that long would have already moved on to better-paying jobs. Taking those kinds of jobs was only useful to adventurers like me who weren’t able to improve despite years of practice.

Wolf nodded and said, “Well there’s that too.”

“Too?” I asked.

So that wasn’t the job he wanted me to take. That made sense. Wolf did say

he had a particular job he was having trouble with. He wouldn't have phrased it that way if he just wanted me to take care of the backlog of errands.

"We'd appreciate it if you could also crunch through those errand jobs when you have the time, but what I really need from you is something else. I told you that I had guild employees taking care of some jobs, yeah? Well, as a result, we've been running behind on the usual tasks that those employees are supposed to do. We're at a point where we can't handle any more work. And unfortunately, the last person we wanted knowing about the new dungeon has found out about it. So now I need someone to go pick up a new visitor."

It was someone that Wolf, the guildmaster here in Maalt, needed to welcome personally. They were important then. But in that case...

"So you can just go yourself, right, Wolf?"

Wolf quickly shook his head. "You wanna take a look through this paperwork and say that again?" The vein on his forehead twitched.

My first impression of this office had been that it was where people who hated paperwork were damned to after they died. The reason Wolf's eye was bloodshot wasn't because he was angry, but because he was just not getting enough sleep. The fact that this man, the very epitome of physical strength, was this close to snapping... I had to admit I felt sorry for him.

"It's fine. Don't look at me with pity," Wolf said, waving his hand around dismissively. "If you're going to do that, then take the job I'm offering you."

He wasn't asking anything too terrible, so I nodded, figuring it wasn't that big of a deal.

"All right, fine. I don't mind going to pick someone up. So who is it?"

Wolf sighed, looking like he'd eaten something sour. "The grand guildmaster of the Kingdom of Yaaran."



"The grand guildmaster? Wait, aren't they in charge of all the adventurers in Yaaran? Are you sure I'm the right man for the job?"

Since Wolf was telling me to go welcome them, I'd assumed it was someone

important, but this was beyond what I'd expected. I immediately wondered if he should have asked someone else instead of a nobody like me.

"I'm not telling you to go fight, or propose major reforms to the guild or whatever, so that won't be an issue, will it? All you have to do is meet him and bring him here. Is that so much to ask?" Wolf said as though he were asking me to run to the corner store.

Maybe he was right. If anything, the job might be perfectly suited for a lowly underling like me.

"I get what you're trying to say," Wolf added. "The grand guildmaster is an almost mythical figure for an ordinary adventurer. But like I said earlier, I have this mountain of paperwork to deal with. Besides, I've got other work too, so I can't just leave Maalt. You get that right? Unless... If you've decided to accept my offer and become my successor, then I'd be happy to teach you the basics and leave the guild in your hands as I go off to pick up the grand guildmaster. Would you rather do that?"



That was a terrifying proposal. I was sure he was joking, but when I looked closely, he had a scary little smile on his face. His expression was hard to read. Was he being serious or just messing with me? I knew that if I answered the wrong way he might very well put that plan into motion.

“No, I respectfully decline,” I answered immediately. “I’ll go. I’ll go pick him up. But the grand guildmaster is in the capital, right?”

There was no way such an important person would be working out of some random village in the middle of nowhere. The man in charge of all of the adventurers in Yaaran had to be in the capital, right?

“Yes, so you’ll have to make a quick trip to Vistelya. I get it’s not exactly ‘quick,’ but I’m not telling you to cross a border or anything. On a fast mount, you’d get there within a week or so. On the whole, it’d be about a two-week commitment. I’ll make sure you get paid well. It’s technically an employee job, but you’re technically a temp, so I intend to pay you for your work.”

That was good to hear. But the capital, huh? If I used the teleportation circle at the Ancient Kingdom, I’d get there in less than a day. That wasn’t an option, though. I couldn’t take the grand guildmaster to that place. I’d never met him, and I didn’t know how much I could trust him. I’d heard that Wolf held him in high esteem, but you had to interact with people yourself to get a sense of their character. We’d have to travel using normal methods.

It was kind of a hassle, but it might not be such a bad thing to go to Vistelya. I had an errand I needed to run there anyway. I needed to go see the people I’d saved the last time I went to Vistelya. I’d told them that I would visit them within a few days, but I’d also told them I was an adventurer, so hopefully they would cut me a little slack. If not, I hoped Augurey had dealt with any inquiries. Still, I supposed I should come up with an excuse while I could. A new dungeon appearing in Maalt would make a good excuse.

“As an adventurer! I just had to see the newly formed dungeon! Please forgive me for putting that first!”

Could I really get away with that? Probably not. I’d just have to rely on their kindness.

I said to Wolf, “I’ll head out tomorrow. I need to make arrangements for a carriage.”

“Oh, so you’ll take the job? You’re a lifesaver.”

Wolf sounded relieved. Perhaps he didn’t want to disrespect the grand guildmaster despite how busy he was. Based on the rumors I’d heard, the grand guildmaster was the one who’d assigned Wolf to his current position after he was so badly injured he couldn’t continue as an adventurer. I’m sure Wolf felt indebted to the grand guildmaster.

“Oh, we’ll arrange a carriage for you, so just go and get packing. Also, I’ll make sure the paperwork you need is ready for you before you leave.”

“You’re going out of your way despite how busy you are, aren’t you?”

He was putting in an awful lot of work for someone so short on people that he was willing to conscript a walking corpse. Something felt a little off, but maybe I was being paranoid.

“It’s not like the grand guildmaster’s got the time to meet a random adventurer from Maalt. You’ll need some letters of introduction to see him. That’s something only I can prepare, so I can’t use the fact I’m busy as an excuse. As for the carriage, that’s about the most we can help this time. Think of it as a token of thanks. Besides, you’re taking a job you have no real obligation to take.”

It was just like Wolf to care about the details that concerned me, even though it looked like he was forcing me to do him a favor. I took his words at face value.

“In that case, I’ll gratefully accept the help. All right, I need to go get ready.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

We went over a few minor administrative matters and then I left Wolf’s office.



The door to the guildmaster’s office closed with a click. Wolf sighed in relief. He then made sure Rentt’s presence had completely disappeared from beyond the door.

“Phew. I was worried there for a second, but I somehow managed to push it on him. He can be sharp, so I was worried that he’d figure it out at some point. But it seems he interpreted everything in the best possible light. Thank the gods.”

Wolf’s words sounded ominous as he murmured to himself.

“Good luck, Rentt. I wouldn’t want to go even if I had the time to spare.”

Wolf placed the pile of paperwork he’d been carrying on top of his desk and resumed his work.



“Let’s see. My main longsword, a dagger for skinning, changes of clothes, dried meat, salt... They’re all here, right? Good, good.”

I nodded to myself as I spread out my belongings. That wasn’t everything in my magic bag, but it was everything I’d need for the journey I was about to set off on in the morning.

Because my magic bag was so large, there were a lot of unnecessary things inside it, things like random shiny rocks that I’d picked up somewhere and cool-looking pieces of driftwood. I honestly wasn’t sure why I was carrying them, but I could just toss them if I ended up needing more room.

“I hate to interrupt you, as you’re so excited about your trip, but doesn’t it strike you as odd?” Lorraine said as she leaned against the doorway.

“Yeah. A lot. I know.”

“Then why did you accept his request and come straight home?”

While Lorraine looked faintly exasperated, she also seemed resigned because she knew it was just like me to do something like this.

“I need to go to the capital anyway. I have business there. Besides, I’ve caused Wolf a lot of trouble, so it won’t hurt to do a favor for him every once in a while.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve been doing him plenty of favors, not just ‘once in a while.’”

“You think?”

Lorraine was probably right. But people needed to support each other to survive. And having Wolf owe me a favor might come in handy, so it was like sowing seeds for the future.

“Of course,” Lorraine answered. “But the grand guildmaster, huh? I’ve met the Imperial grand guildmaster, but I’ve yet to meet the Yaaran one.”

“Huh, really? I figured as a Silver-class adventurer, you’d have at least seen him once.”

“I don’t know how it is in Yaaran, but the only adventurers the empire’s grand guildmaster meets are Gold-class and above. The only reason I’ve met the Imperial grand guildmaster was because I met him as a scholar. And if I recall, his bodyguards were all Gold-class adventurers.”

“I see.”

The grand guildmaster was over all the adventurers in the kingdom. Maybe it would make more sense to use even Platinum-or Mithril-class adventurers as bodyguards. But adventurers of that rank were so rare and valuable that it was hard to determine if they or the guildmaster were more important.

While many guildmasters were former adventurers like Wolf, they were still only the administrative heads of the guild. It was rare for them to be heroes or notable personalities. Furthermore, many of the Platinum-and Mithril-class adventurers were...eccentric. They wouldn’t necessarily listen to orders from a guildmaster, and the guildmaster wouldn’t have any way to make them listen. Nive Maris was still a Gold-class adventurer, but she’d eventually reach Platinum-class. That was what Platinum-and Mithril-class adventurers were like.

Wait, what was it that I so admired about Mithril-class adventurers? I couldn’t help but wonder. There were some wonderful, admirable people who were Mithril-class. Yes, those were the people that I wanted to be like. Right.

“Just for my own edification, what do you find suspicious about Wolf’s request?” I asked Lorraine. I wasn’t going to turn down the request after hearing her reasoning, but it was still useful to get her perspective.

“There are several things. First, I’m not sure why the grand guildmaster

doesn't just come here. He could take a fancy carriage with some Gold-class bodyguards, for example."

Every once in a while, nobles came from the capital, and that was how they usually traveled.

"Wolf said that he wanted to send a report to headquarters from the Maalt branch. He regularly sends reports by mail, but he thought it'd be easier for someone who was familiar with the situation to explain the details. I'm supposed to ask the grand guildmaster to come to Maalt because there might be various problems with the new dungeon."

"So it's a matter of form?" Lorraine asked.

"That's what Wolf was saying. Someone as important as the grand guildmaster has a lot of commitments, so he can't just up and leave the capital. He needs a reason that's easy to present to the public."

"That makes some sense, but it still seems a bit thin..."

I thought I'd offered a reasonable explanation, but Lorraine still had her doubts. Maybe I should have been a little annoyed at how picky she was being, but the truth was I felt the same.

"Right? It feels kind of forced," I replied.

"So you think there's some other reason?"

"Just a hunch, but yeah. I don't have any clue what it might be, though. Maybe I'm just being paranoid, or maybe it's something to worry about. Honestly, I can't know either way until I go."

I was going to learn the truth anyway whether I liked it or not once I got to the capital. Since I'd already decided I was going, then I'd basically accepted whatever would be coming my way.

When I explained that to Lorraine, she said, "If you're fine with it, then I'll give it a pass. The only thing now is the promise you have to keep in the capital."

"From when we saved that princess, right? Augurey and I can go to the palace by ourselves, but if we did, they'd ask why you weren't there and tell us to bring you along as well. I think it'd be best if you came with us, Lorraine. What do you

think?”

“I don’t mind traveling again, but what about Rina?”



Lorraine was concerned about leaving the newly undead Rina by herself.

“We’re not going to be gone that long. We could ask Isaac to watch out for her,” I suggested.

Though Rina wasn’t exactly a vampire, she was close enough, and Isaac was a vampire. She could go to him if she needed to. Laura was currently asleep, she was the power behind the scenes.

Wait, that sounded like I was part of an evil organization or something. Laura and Isaac were technically monsters, but they weren’t evil at heart. They were kind of like the old man who used to be a menace to society, but was now an upstanding member of the community. Something like that. Isaac was once allied with Shumini, so he was a much bigger menace than a young man joining a random gang, but it was similar, right?

At any rate, Laura and Isaac were no longer in the business of randomly attacking people for no reason. They did attack people if they had a reason, though. They were vampires, so some of that was just unavoidable. But evidently they didn’t need that much blood, and there weren’t any strings of disappearances in the city. There had been some incidents over the years, like the disappearances related to Shumini, but Isaac and Laura had been here for decades, even centuries, so they hadn’t been involved with any of those. We were comfortable leaving Rina in their care.

“That will do for Rina, but what about Alize?” Lorraine asked.

Alize was a child from the orphanage. Lorraine was teaching her magic, and I was teaching her adventuring skills. That could wait, however. She didn’t need to become an adventurer or mage in the next few days or anything.

“Why don’t we leave it to Rina?” I suggested.

Rina was an adventurer herself. With her increased physical abilities and her supernatural powers, she was rapidly improving and was one of the promising

young stars of... Maybe that was overstating it. Still, in terms of magic and skills, she was much further along than Alize.

Lorraine was quite amused by the idea. “Oh, yes, that might be a good idea. Rina looked like she wanted a protégé of her own.”

When exactly had Rina looked that way? Lately, Rina had been exploring the Water Moon Dungeon alone, or rather, with my familiar Edel. Rina had her own party to adventure with, but they hadn’t yet recovered enough to return. She was using this opportunity to train. She usually went at night, so while she was technically staying at Lorraine’s house, she wasn’t there at dinner time. She was always around in the morning. Like me, she needed very little sleep now. An ordinary human couldn’t and shouldn’t try the same thing.

Though Lorraine and I were teaching her things, in the end, adventurers learned best through actual adventuring. There were things that you could only learn by engaging in mortal combat with monsters. That was why Rina was going adventuring on her own. In addition, she needed to make a living as an adventurer. Given her current physical abilities, she could make decent money just by attacking things with brute force, but there was an art to efficiently dealing with tasks.

As an adventurer, you needed skills so you could avoid going broke in the event you lost your usual sources of income. It wasn’t just about combat skill either. You needed to know how to dissect a monster and identify the most profitable parts. The best way to learn those skills was to put in time inside a dungeon.

I was a bit too concerned to send Rina in completely alone, so I’d asked Edel to go along with her as a chaperone, a temporary party member. Rina and Edel were both my familiars, so I figured they’d get along well. And, in fact, they’d been dungeon diving without any trouble.

Because Edel had seniority as my familiar and because he had always been a monster, he was a bit better at manipulating mana than Rina. Consequently, he treated her like an apprentice, not a party member. Whenever she returned from the dungeon, she would talk about how Edel had taken over and how she hoped she’d have a protégé of her own someday...or something to that effect.

But she always looked at me while she was saying that, a hopeful glint in her eye. I had to admit, I didn't want those expectations on my shoulders. She was like a child who wanted a younger sibling. I couldn't just make familiars willy-nilly. She always looked crestfallen when I said that, though. I wasn't doing anything bad, but I couldn't help but feel guilty.

Alize might be a solution to that problem. She wasn't a familiar, just a human child, but since she was eventually going to become an adventurer and a mage, she could be a protégé to Rina.

"You're thinking that Rina will stop looking at you like she wants a younger sibling, right?" Lorraine said with a chuckle.

"Yeah, that's part of it," I confessed.

"It's not a bad proposal. Rina has much to learn as an adventurer, but Alize won't be going to the dungeon with her. I'm sure Rina would be happy to train Alize if we tell her she'd be coming here a few days a week to teach her as a mentor."

"Yeah, probably. So, since we got all that out of the way, will you be coming with me, Lorraine?"

"Yes, I'll accompany you. Besides, in an emergency, I can instantly return from the capital."

She was referring to the teleportation circles, but that was only for an extreme emergency. There was little chance it'd be necessary, and we'd return home by carriage.



"Are you ready?" Lorraine calmly asked Rina, who was seated across from her. Lorraine was referring to whether Rina was ready to meet her new protégé.

Last night, a messenger from the guild came to inform us that they'd secured a carriage for our trip. Fortunately, they had arranged for us to depart later in the afternoon, which gave us more time to wrap up our business here. I suspected that Wolf had gone out of his way to accommodate me. He probably thought that since he'd sprung the request on me without warning, I would

need time to take care of things first. Wolf had guessed right, and since we weren't leaving until at least noon, I was grateful for the extra time.

The first thing we had to do was introduce Rina and Alize to each other. Then we'd discuss Rina teaching Alize while we were away. Though we called it a discussion, we had already decided on the basic details. However, if it turned out that neither Rina nor Alize wanted to deal with the other, we were going to scrap the plan entirely. And if so, we'd have to put Alize's training on hold for two weeks. I would feel guilty for making her wait, but we'd deal with that if it happened. We didn't have a set lesson plan or anything anyway.

"Y-Yes, I'm ready. All set!" Rina stammered. It didn't sound like she was ready at all.

We were currently at Maalt's Second Orphanage, waiting for Alize to return. According to Lillian, the head of the orphanage, Alize was out shopping and would be back shortly, so we'd decided to wait. We had helped Rina prepare to meet Alize, but she was still anxious. She didn't need to be so nervous about it, but Alize would be her first protégé, so I could understand her anxiety.

As I was wondering how things would go, I heard a knock on the door.

"Come in," I called. I'd meant to sound self-assured, but the truth was I didn't have any authority in my voice.

As I was sulking about my lack of gravitas, Alize appeared from the other side of the door and greeted everyone. She relaxed when she saw Lorraine and me, but then she noticed the unfamiliar face in the room. Her brows furrowed, and she grimaced.

"Hello Rentt and Professor Lorraine. I heard guests were here to see me, so I was a little nervous."

Though she'd said that, Alize didn't look all that nervous. She was just trying to be on her best behavior. I guessed Lillian hadn't mentioned who was waiting for her. That, or she'd sent one of the other children to give Alize the message.

As the head of the orphanage, Lillian stayed busy. She most likely didn't have the time to wait for Alize just to give her a short message. Plus, it was just us. I'd already told Lillian that she needn't treat us with any special care, and Alize

already knew us very well.

I told Alize, “We’re technically guests, but you don’t have to address us with titles.”

“I add a title for Professor Lorraine because she’s a great mage. But Rentt...you’re just Rentt.”

That was kind of insulting if I thought about it, but Alize was only being frank because she felt comfortable with us, so I wasn’t about to chastise her for it.

Lorraine had often told Alize that she didn’t need to add a title to her name, but unlike me, Lorraine had a certain amount of gravitas. She couldn’t seem to get rid of it. The fact that she was a scholar only reinforced her authority. By contrast, I was just a simple adventurer. Hardly anyone addressed me by a title, so it was fine.

“What exactly are you implying?” I asked Alize. “I mean, not that it matters.”

“It’s nothing bad, really, but uh... Who is that?”

Alize seemed really curious about Rina. She was being casual with us, but perhaps she was trying to calm herself because there was someone in the room she’d never met.

“Oh, that’s right. This is Rina. And Rina, this is Alize,” Lorraine stated laconically.

She was being a little *too* laconic, if you asked me. But it wasn’t out of disrespect or rudeness.

Rina practically hopped out of her seat to introduce herself. “I’m Rina Rupaage. I’m an Iron-class adventurer, and I’m a disciple of Miss Lorraine and Rentt.”

Alize chuckled softly and said, “I’m Alize. I’m one of the children of this orphanage, and I’m learning adventuring and magic from Rentt and Professor Lorraine.”

Ah, so Lorraine had kept her introduction short so that Rina and Alize could describe themselves in their own words.

“Basically, you two are both our students,” Lorraine explained after they’d

finished their introductions. “As for who has seniority, that’s a little bit tricky.”

Lorraine had a point. If we went by how long they’d studied, then Alize would be the senior of the two. But if we went by who was more skilled, then it would be Rina. Also, Rina was older and more thoroughly involved in our affairs.

“There’s no need to worry about that,” I said.

“Yes. We came here today to introduce you to each other,” Lorraine added.

Alize tilted her head.

“Lorraine and I are going away for a bit,” I explained to Alize. “It’s only for about two weeks, but we won’t be able to teach you during that time. So we thought that you could train with Rina while we’re gone.”

“Huh? Where are you going?” Alize asked.

“Vistelya, the royal capital. Would you like us to bring you back any souvenirs?”

“The capital? Maybe something tasty...for everyone here.”

The fact that Alize was thinking of the kids at the orphanage just showed how kind she was. She took her role as the big sister seriously.

“All right,” I agreed. “So what do you think about what I just said? It’s just a suggestion, so you don’t have to if you don’t want to, but...”

“Hmm... Can I talk to her alone for a little bit?”

Lorraine and I exchanged glances. Then I turned to Rina. “I guess we’ll leave the room for a little bit. Is that okay with you, Rina?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind at all. Alize, are you okay with that too?”

“Yes.”

Lorraine and I left the two of them alone in the waiting room.



“Oh, why are you standing out here? I thought you were talking with Alize.”

Lillian, who’d just left her office, came over to talk to us. She had been ill and confined to bed up until recently, but there appeared to be no lingering effects.

I was relieved to see her looking rosy and plump.

“Oh, as for that,” Lorraine started, then explained the situation.

“Ah, I see,” Lillian said. “Personal chemistry is important in such matters.”

“How does it look to you, Lady Lillian?” Lorraine asked. “Do you think they will mesh well?”

Lorraine wasn’t expecting a complete answer; she’d just been making conversation. Today was the first time Lillian had met Rina, and their conversation had been brief. She wouldn’t have gotten a good sense of Rina’s personality just from that.

Lillian took a second to think, then said, “Miss Rina seems like a very honest and pure young woman, so I think she would get along well with Alize. Alize is less straightforward than her, but she’s a gentle child at heart. I think she could be herself around someone like Miss Rina, rather than someone who was overly serious or stern.”

Lady Lillian’s observations were so thorough that even Lorraine and I nodded along to her explanation.

“Your reasoning makes a lot of sense,” Lorraine acknowledged, “but you only met Rina today. I’m impressed by how much you can tell from such a short acquaintance.”

Lillian smiled gently. “I’ve been the head of this orphanage for a long time. I’ve learned to assess a young person’s personality with only a brief interaction. Of course, there are plenty of times I can’t get a clear sense of a child that quickly. I also believe it’s best not to prejudge. But Miss Rina seems very honest and straightforward, and I’ve known Alize for a long time.”

Lillian’s experience must have taught her how to ascertain a person’s character with just a short introduction. I wished she’d teach me how to do that. My social abilities were sorely lacking. Given that I’d always lurked in dark dungeons by myself, I hadn’t picked up that sort of knowledge.

As for Lorraine, her social skills were surprisingly good. That hadn’t been the case when she first came to Maalt—she’d seemed like a typical sheltered scholar then—but her social graces had improved tremendously in the ten years

she'd been here. I didn't know how she did it, but maybe it came down to intelligence. She was just able to pick up and absorb things like social cues and mannerisms better than me.

"It's a relief to hear you say that, Lady Lillian," I said.

"Really? If I had a concern, it would be that they might squabble over relatively minor things."

Just as I noted that things would be fine, Lillian threw in an additional observation with a mischievous smile. That was part of her charm, though.

A moment later, Lillian tilted her head as though something had just occurred to her. "Oh, that reminds me. You two are going to the capital, right?"

She sounded serious, so we straightened our backs and looked directly at her.

"Yes, that's true," Lorraine confirmed. "Is there something...?"

Lillian waved her arms, looking embarrassed. "Oh, no, no. It's not important, so you don't have to look so solemn. But if you have time while you're in the capital, I would appreciate it if you could deliver a letter to the Church of the Eastern Sky for me. I'll happily pay you the going rate for that service."

Since this was a job, we listened intently. Compared to hunting monsters or guarding someone, her request was a bit less stressful because we wouldn't need to risk our lives. Still, that didn't mean it was completely safe. After all, it was a long way from Maalt to the capital. There was always a chance you'd run into bandits or monsters on the way. However, we'd already factored those risks into our journey, so her request wouldn't expose us to any additional dangers.

I was prepared to take the job, but I figured I should still check with Lorraine. "Do you think we'll have the time?" I asked her.

"The Church of the Eastern Sky's main facility is in the capital. The Great Cathedral isn't that far from the guild, so it shouldn't be too much trouble. Even if it took an entire day to deliver the letter, Wolf's request isn't that urgent."

"Yeah, you're right. Even including travel time, we've got one or two extra days built into our schedule in case of trouble. It's not a problem."

“And since I’m not involved in the guild job, I can always deliver the letter by myself. There’s not much to worry about on the whole.”

“Oh, right. Good point.”

The guild had asked me to take the job, so Lorraine could deliver the letter while I was busy doing that.

Lorraine turned back to Lillian and said, “Since Rentt has a job from the guild, I don’t know if he’ll have the time, but if you’re okay with me delivering the letter, then I would happily accept your request. There’s no time to register it with the guild, so it will be a personal contract. Is that all right?”

Lorraine had mentioned that I might not have the time as a precaution. Chances were that I’d be able to fit it in, but I couldn’t say that with any certainty. Lorraine, on the other hand, could definitely do it.

“That’s more than fine,” Lillian said. “You’ve done so much for Alize, Miss Lorraine, so I trust you. I’ll have the letter ready before you depart, so could you stop by my office before you leave?”

“Yes, of course,” Lorraine replied.



“Oh, there they are.”

After we finished our conversation with Lillian, Lorraine and I had decided to wait in the orphanage’s chapel. Before long, we heard voices coming from the entrance. When we turned to see who it was, we found Alize and Rina standing there.

“Seems they’ve finished their chat,” Lorraine remarked.

“Yes, it does.”

I exchanged glances with Lorraine, and we stood up from the pew. When we approached Alize and Rina, we noticed that they both looked happy, so it was easy to imagine that their conversation had gone relatively well.

“Are you two done?” Lorraine asked them.

They both nodded.

“Yes!” Rina exclaimed with a radiant smile. “We’ve decided we’ll work hard on our training together!”

I thought Rina would be teaching Alize, not training alongside her, but Alize would technically still be learning. Plus, Rina had been training hard up to this point, and she’d studiously worked on the lessons Lorraine and I had taught her, so she was clearly up to the task.

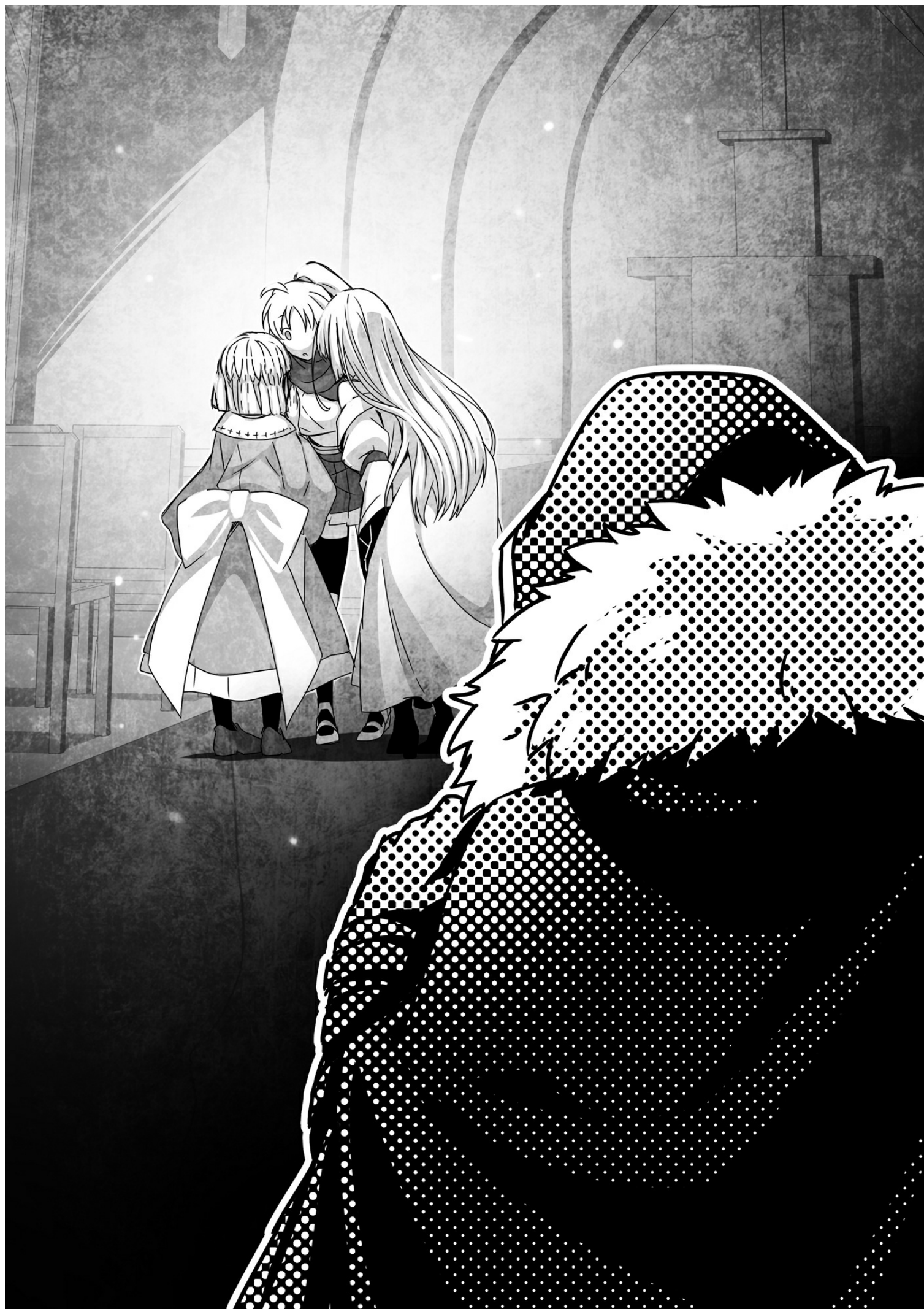
“I see. So what did you end up talking about?” Lorraine asked them.

Alize put her index finger to her lips. “That’s...a secret.”

Lorraine tilted her head. “Why?”

Alize briefly glanced at me, and Lorraine, who was keen enough to catch the hint, then shooed me away with her hand. I quietly obeyed and sat in a pew in the corner of the chapel.

I felt strangely left out. I watched as the three of them began to talk quietly. My ears had gotten keener, so I thought that maybe I could hear them even from this distance, but when I actually tried to listen in, I couldn’t hear a thing. I knew it wasn’t that my ears had gotten worse, because I couldn’t even hear the rustle of their clothes.



When I looked more closely, I saw that Lorraine was using magic. It was a wind spell that muffled any sound coming from a particular location. Since they were discussing something secret, it made sense Lorraine would do that.

That said, I felt even more isolated than I had earlier. I lightly hugged my knees to my chest. I was this odd presence, lurking in the corner of a chapel, garbed in a black robe, wearing a skull mask, and hugging my knees. I was like a demon or a malign spirit of some sort. But I had divinity, so maybe I was closer to an angel.

After a while, I heard Lorraine say, "Rentt, we're done."

I raised my head. There was no trace of the wind magic left, so they must have finished their conversation. I didn't say anything and approached them in silence.

"Don't be so pouty," Lorraine quipped, looking a tad exasperated. "Though, I'm sorry we left you out like that. But there are topics that women can't discuss in the company of men. You know that, right?"

When I read between the lines, I knew she was saying that I needed to be less oblivious.

"No, it's fine. I was just a little lonely," I admitted.

I hadn't really minded all that much. After spending ten years adventuring in dungeons, I'd mastered the art of being alone. I wasn't going to be all that upset by a few minutes more. I was just playing anyway, or at least putting on an act. Besides, I already knew what they'd talked about. It had to be about me. I didn't know what they'd said, though.

"Then that's fine," Lorraine stated. "At any rate, we don't have to worry about Rina and Alize. It looks like we can leave without any lingering concerns."

"Yeah, true. We don't exactly have time to dawdle, so why don't we get going?" I suggested.

Lorraine nodded. Then we left the chapel, stopped at Lillian's office to get her letter, and departed the orphanage.

Alize had wanted to come see us off at the carriage stop, but as one of the older children at the orphanage, she had a fair number of chores to do. It wasn't like we were never going to see each other again, so we said our goodbyes at the orphanage's entrance.

As we made our way to the carriage stop, I warned Rina about various things to be careful of while we were gone.

"First, make sure to prioritize your safety. Also, if anything happens, go to Isaac for help. Not that I expect anything to happen, but..."

Rina cheerfully said, "Yes, I understand! Oh, also, I'm looking forward to your souvenirs!"

Unlike Alize, there was no modesty or hesitation in Rina's words. Her frankness and honesty were part of her charm. Alize often acted more mature than her age. I supposed that was because she'd grown up in an orphanage and had learned to save things for other children. She was starting to lose that hesitation with us, but she was still too deferential when it came to her own desires. But we weren't going to force her to ask for things.

"Rina, you grew up in the capital, didn't you?" asked Lorraine. "Wouldn't you have already seen anything we could bring back?"

Rina was now a pseudo-vampire understudy and an adventurer in the backwater city of Maalt, but she was the daughter of a knight family and originally from the capital. She'd perhaps had a big allowance for luxuries while she was growing up. Souvenirs wouldn't be all that exciting.

I expressed as much, but Rina hurriedly corrected us. "I wasn't really the girl from a nice family! Though I'm part of a knight family, a noble family, we weren't that well off. There are a lot of noble families like that, but my parents were pretty stern. Though, we did have a big house."

I'd been joking, since I figured that was the case. It was true that the higher the noble title, the more money the family had, but it also wasn't rare for families lower on the social hierarchy to have more money than those higher than them. For example, there were commoners who were richer than the highest-ranking dukes. Rich merchants were another good example.

“Then I guess you’ll want us to bring you some gifts,” Lorraine noted. “What would you like? If you leave it to Rentt, he’ll buy you something strange.”

Rina took something out of her pocket. “Here. If you could select from this list,” she said with a smile.

The object she’d handed me was a small notebook made of cheap, rough paper. It was one of the notebooks that Lorraine generously let Rina and I use as much as we liked. Lorraine even had a magic item that would tear the paper into pieces and reform it if we made a mistake, so we used them liberally. Though low-quality paper was inexpensive, it wasn’t so cheap that we could use it so casually without that.

Lorraine looked over my shoulder. “Ah, this is a map of the capital. And listed are store names and their well-known products.”

Rina nodded enthusiastically. “I stayed up late last night making it! It’s a perfect tour guide for the capital!”

When we’d told Rina last night that we were going to the capital, she had dashed off to her room. I’d wondered what she was doing, but it seemed she’d been busily working on this little guidebook.



“But we’re not going sightseeing,” I murmured to myself.

Rina balled her hand into a fist. “But there are lots of fun places in the capital! There’s no harm in seeing them!” she declared with conviction.

Compared to Maalt, Vistelya was an enormous metropolis. Maalt was a relatively large city, but it was still on the outskirts of the country. It couldn’t compare to Vistelya, the capital of the Kingdom of Yaaran. Even elevators, of which Maalt only had a handful, were a common sight in the capital. I was sure that the Tower and the Academy had them, and they were installed in various buildings around the city as well.

Wait, was there one in the guild headquarters? I’d gone there once before, but since I’d been in such a hurry at the time, I’d only seen the first floor. It was a really big building, though, so it probably had one. Not that I was going to the capital to look at all the elevators. They were just extremely rare in Maalt, but

common in the capital.

“If we have time,” I said. “Don’t expect too much in the way of gifts.”

I’d have a fair amount of time, but there was no guarantee. Wolf had left this job in my care. I couldn’t help feeling there was some sort of danger lurking on the other side. I had no idea what could be so dangerous about picking someone up, but there was no harm in being cautious.

“Oh, if you don’t have much time, there’s a souvenir shop near the entrance of the capital where you can buy all of those things in a single place.”

Rina really wasn’t giving up on this. Since she’d grown up in the capital, she must have had a certain fondness for it. She wasn’t homesick, but I supposed there were some things she missed.

When I asked Rina that, she tilted her head and looked blankly at me. Her expression basically said that my question had caught her off guard and that the thought had never occurred to her.

“She might feel that way deep in her subconscious,” Lorraine interjected, “but she’s not really aware of it. Rina can be a bit oblivious, and she’s not the sort to get caught up thinking about something.”

Rina had been like that since the day we met. An ordinary person who ran into a talking undead would see death approaching and either run or do everything they could to kill it. They wouldn’t think that it might be safe to talk to.

Furthermore, most people would intensely panic if they became undead themselves. Rina wasn’t unfazed by the fact that she’d become one, but she didn’t seem all that bothered by it either. I wasn’t one to talk, but I did spend a lot of nights thinking about it. However, I was similar to Rina in that I’d avoided reflecting on unpleasant realities during the ten years I’d spent stuck as a Bronze-class adventurer. In that sense, I was still the same person as I’d always been.

I supposed that people who took such concerns too seriously weren’t suited to life—or unlife—as an undead creature. Maybe that sort of person would’ve eventually turned into a monster like Shumini. I couldn’t imagine Rina or myself

ever becoming anything like that. Even if we gave up on becoming human, the most we'd do was sing jauntily in the graveyard.

"I guess it's fine as long as Rina's not feeling particularly homesick," I said.

"On the surface, at least," Lorraine replied. "I'm sure deep down there's a part of her that misses the capital, so the least we can do is bring back a few souvenirs. If you're too busy, I'll make the time to go shopping."

"Your to-do list keeps growing, doesn't it?" I said apologetically.

Lorraine's lips widened into a confident grin. "It still might be easier than what's waiting for you, Rentt."

What an ominous thing to say. Of course, she was trying to say that I needed to be on my toes because we had no idea what might happen when we got to the capital.

"I really hope there aren't any odd events lurking in my future," I commented.

"Your body's just a magnet for trouble as of late. Don't you think it's time to make peace with that?"

I glanced down at the ground, crestfallen, but she was right. I resigned myself to that fate, and we headed toward the carriage stop.



"Took you a while to get here."

When we arrived at the carriage stop, we saw Wolf waiting for us.

"What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be busy?" I blurted out without thinking.

"I am busy. I was working while I was waiting for you."

Wolf showed me some papers, which had a record of deliveries from the capital written on it. The fact that the guildmaster himself had to deal with such a trivial administrative task meant that the manpower shortage at the guild was just that serious.

Wolf must have guessed what I was thinking, because he added, "There were things among the delivery that I needed to sign off on directly. I ordinarily

wouldn't do this, but... Anyway, here's the promised documents."

Wolf handed me a leather bag with a sheaf of papers inside. It was quite a collection of forms, and when I peeked inside, I saw that they were packed in tightly. I couldn't bring myself to check each sheet, though I knew I had to at some point.

"I'll trust you, Wolf, and just look at them in the carriage."

It wasn't that I couldn't be bothered. Probably not anyway.

"Yeah, do that. Not like there'd be any mistakes, since I did the work myself. Also, this is the carriage you'll be taking this time. Nice, right?"

Wolf pointed to a carriage hooked up to a giant reptile known as a creeping lizard. It was similar to a gecko or a newt, but much larger. I supposed this one looked more like a newt. Not only were they extremely fast, but they could also stay submerged in water. They could even pull ships in a pinch, making them an extremely flexible and valuable draft animal. Due to its appearance, they weren't very popular among women, but they were widely used in the transportation industry. Securing a carriage pulled by one would have required a fair amount of money and effort.

"I'm impressed you found one of these in Maalt," Lorraine said with a touch of admiration.

You didn't see these animals very often here. If I remembered correctly, it was because its breeding grounds were really far from here.

"It was mostly a coincidence," Wolf added. "I just got lucky. But this should get you to the capital a bit more quickly. I'm counting on you."

We nodded to Wolf and boarded the carriage.



"We're nearing the royal capital of Vistelya. Please ready your identification and any other necessary documents," the driver announced.

Five days after we set off from Maalt, we finally arrived. When I peeked outside the carriage, I saw that we were in line, waiting to be admitted into the city.

The driver was someone Wolf had found. He was evidently someone who could keep his mouth shut when necessary. Normally, I'd still question whether I could trust him, but I'm sure Wolf didn't want my secret getting out. He would have picked someone discreet, which meant that this driver was trustworthy. Not to mention, Lorraine and I swore we'd seen this driver's face before. We hadn't mentioned anything in front of Wolf, though.

"There are numerous barriers and defensive installations in the capital, particularly from the noble quarter onward. Please, please be careful," the driver pleaded, his tone completely different from earlier. He sounded nothing like a carriage driver from somewhere like Maalt. He sounded more like a well-trained butler.

I nodded at him. "Yeah. But so long as we have this, it's safe to assume we won't set them off, right?" I opened up my robe and pointed to a button sewed onto my linen shirt.

"Yes," the driver confirmed after looking. "Nevertheless, we have no way of knowing what could happen if you remove it. You might be okay in the noble district, but in the palace... I was also told that it was highly unlikely that they would react to your presence, Master Rentt."

Lorraine noted, "We've already tested various detection devices on Rentt. Based on those results, I'd also say he wouldn't trigger any of those devices, but there's nothing wrong with taking additional precautions. I'd also considered several measures on my end, but I'm grateful to have the help of the Latuule family and their extensive collection of specialized magic items. But are you sure Isaac won't draw Lady Laura's ire later when she wakes up?"

Yes, this driver was one of the Latuule family's retainers. Obviously, he wasn't human. He was a lesser vampire and one of Laura and Isaac's underlings. I didn't know whose familiar he was, but either way, he wouldn't leak my secret. Or rather, if we were ever in a situation where he did divulge my secret, we'd already be screwed. I couldn't beat Laura or Isaac, not in combat, authority, or financial power. That was why it was better to not suspect anything and just rely on their help.

"Lady Laura has always been fond of you, Master Rentt, even before she

entered her sleep. I doubt she'd chastise anyone for lending you aid. Lady Laura is rarely angered by anything anyway. Something as minor as this, even if it went against her wishes... She would likely smile and forgive the offense."

This driver had a pretty loose relationship with his master. Then again, he hadn't been insubordinate in any way. I supposed it was a sort of trust. That, or Laura was the type to laugh and forgive even complete insubordination. I was starting to feel that it might be the latter.

I didn't know if it was true, but there was a common urban legend that vampires hated boredom more than anything else. If that was true, then it wouldn't surprise me to learn that vampires like Laura might be okay if her subordinates acted against her wishes as long as it kept her entertained. That was scary to think about. It could very well mean that Isaac and this lesser vampire were entirely untrustworthy.

Well, there was no point in worrying about that. As I'd said earlier, there was nothing I could do about it, so it was best to trust them. If my worst predictions came true, the most we could do was run like hell. Fortunately, we had access to teleportation circles, and we could leave the capital, get to the Ancient City, and escape to somewhere so far away that it'd be hard to catch us.

"It's our turn. I believe the gate guard will pull up the flap and check, so please show your identification papers at that time."

Our driver, the lesser vampire, turned to the front and drove the carriage onward.



"Two passengers, hm?"

After a while, as the lesser vampire had said, the guard opened the flap to the carriage and peered in. Lorraine and I smiled vaguely in his direction. My smile had no effect, but Lorraine's smile seemed to have some influence on the guard. He relaxed a little.

He hadn't fallen in love with her at first sight or anything, nor was he stunned by her beauty. Passengers in carriages were usually exhausted after a long journey, and most didn't bother smiling. Many of them looked blank, even

sullen. Some people would smile at the guards, but most of them were merchants or the like, people who wanted to avoid the guard's suspicion.

It was rare for a youngish woman like Lorraine, who wasn't a merchant, to smile at them. Young women usually feared guards—in a lot of ways. While those who lived in the capital might look at them with some respect, a young woman visiting from outside the city who was willing to smile at a guard was a rare find.

"And you, in the mask?"

He hadn't let his guard down with me. I knew that I looked suspicious, so I needed to explain my situation.

I held out my adventurer card to the guard and replied, "I have a serious wound on my face. I'm currently saving up to have it treated."

The guard's face softened, but he still said, "Do you mind showing me your face anyway? Just for a moment." He sounded faintly apologetic.

"I can't take it off. I think it's cursed."

"What?"

The guard looked at me skeptically, so I leaned toward him and asked him to pull it as hard as he could. Though he looked perplexed, he agreed to do so. He pulled with all his might, then accepted my explanation and agreed that there was nothing to be done.

"Well, I would prefer to see your face, but it seems your adventurer card is real. I suppose it's fine. Now, what brings you to the capital?"

"We're here to give a report to the grand guildmaster on behalf of Maalt's adventurer's guild. I'll be going to the guild headquarters later, so you can confirm it with them."

The guild headquarters must have been highly respected here, because the guard said, "I see. All right, I'll confirm with them later. But let me be clear. If it turns out that you were lying to me, it will end very badly for you. You understand?"

He had sounded faintly intimidating, and perhaps I was supposed to cower a

bit, but since I wasn't lying in the slightest, I nodded without hesitation.

"Yes, that's fine."

After the guard checked Lorraine's adventurer card, he declared that we could enter the city, and our carriage entered through the capital's gates.

Afterword

Hello, everyone, it's been a while. It is I, Yu Okano. Thank you for purchasing the ninth volume of the Unwanted Undead Adventurer.

The recent issues that have made life so difficult for everyone have also had a negative impact on the novel industry. I'm very grateful to my readers for picking up my books despite all the troubles facing the world. If you just happened to be reading this afterword at the bookstore, I would greatly appreciate it if you would take it to the cash register and buy it. Thank you very much.

Now, enough of the introductions. I knew I needed to write something for the afterword, but I struggled to come up with an idea. I'm sure after nine volumes you are all now familiar with my trouble writing afterwords, and I'm afraid that hasn't changed for this volume either. However, I do believe it's the duty of the author to fill any remaining white space with text. That's why I spent a lot of time thinking about what to write here. Authors usually don't put themselves front and center, and I realized that I'd never really written about myself.

I might have said this before, but I thought I would use this space to write about my current situation. Lately, I've had a lot of uncertainty regarding my health. I wasn't ill with a particular disease or anything. I was simply living an unhealthy lifestyle—meaning I was suffering from obesity and from too much drinking.

One day, I decided I needed to fix those things and started going to the gym. Since I felt it was still a bad idea to go to a place with lots of people, I decided to go to a personal gym where I could work one-on-one with a trainer for a set period. As a result, I've succeeded in losing quite a bit of weight. And since I needed to restrict my diet during that time, I also basically stopped drinking alcohol.

My efforts gave me a sense of when I might regain my health, but what I didn't expect was that not only was I feeling better physically, I was also feeling

better emotionally.

Everything that had been happening made me withdraw into my shell a bit, but whether it was because I started exercising or because I stopped drinking, I've felt a lot more positive about life lately. I even found myself wanting to pick up a hobby, and I'm currently in the process of figuring out what that hobby might be. It was an experience that taught me the importance of mental health, and that maintaining it would give me all sorts of new opportunities.

I've heard that reading a book is good for calming one's spirit. My wish is that in the middle of all of this uncertainty in the world, reading my books will bring some comfort and peace of mind to my readers.

With the hope that we see each other again in the next volume, take care.

Bonus Short Stories

A Day in the Life of Lorraine Vivie

“Lorraine! I don’t get this part!”

“Miss Lorraine! Help me too!”

“Lorraine!”

A number of voices inside the cramped room called my name. We were gathered in a private classroom in the city of Maalt. I occasionally came here to help the students with their studies, so they were pretty familiar with my presence.

Since it was a private classroom, there wasn’t an easy way to discipline the students. The children were of various ages and at varying levels, so it was difficult to make the classroom feel cohesive. In this situation, it was a bit too much to ask that all the children quietly focus on their studies.

When one of the children got too out of hand, I did, on occasion, chastise the child in question. But since there were also children as young as three or four years old, raising my voice wasn’t the wisest course of action. I had learned to strike a careful balance in tone. In the end, the students were willing to listen when it was something of importance, and they all took their studies seriously.

I wasn’t doing any of this for payment, though. I was volunteering. I did this because the community in Maalt was built on mutual aid, and this was part of that way of life.

Most of the students here were children of poor farmers and the like, the sort who couldn’t afford to attend an expensive private school. They did technically charge tuition here, but it was a token amount, so many parents sent their children here for a better future.

I felt that was a worthy thing to do. Education was the most effective way the poor could climb the ranks in society. Of course, there was the option of

becoming an adventurer and achieving success through force of arms, but that path was only available to a select few. Besides, busy classrooms like this one were an indication that the city was doing well. That didn't mean I didn't face a constant string of problems every day, though.

"Lorraine!"

A child suddenly burst into the room and called out my name. He didn't have any classes today, so he had no reason to be here. Yet here he was, looking tense.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"Jad fell into the underground sewer!"

Jad, another one of my students, usually acted without thinking, and he was constantly getting into trouble. This was just another incident among that growing list. However, the underground sewers were concerning. Everyone knew that there was now a dungeon beneath Maalt, but parts of it were connected to the sewers—or rather generated from them. They had yet to find all the routes connecting them and the dungeon, and powerful monsters would occasionally appear there. Ordinarily, skilled adventurers patrolled or watched the sewer entrances, so this shouldn't have been an issue.

"What entrance did he use?" I asked.

"We found a new one the other day," the student said hesitantly.

"Take me there now. Everyone else, stay here and behave yourselves."

The students in the classroom all nodded seriously. They knew how dangerous the sewers were.



"Oh, there really is an entrance here," I muttered.

We were in a secluded corner of Maalt, in a part where numerous buildings had collapsed. Not many people came this way. In the debris, there was a small opening barely large enough for a child to walk through. I squeezed my way between the rubble and slowly hopped my way onward.

Gerge, the boy who'd come seeking my help, acted as my guide. He'd brought

me to what was clearly a sewer entrance, but it was small enough that it made sense no one had found it yet. I was somewhat impressed that the children had spotted it, but that happened when childish curiosity met with a penchant for getting into trouble. At any rate, the most important thing was finding Jad.

“Gerge, you stay here,” I instructed.

“Huh, but—”

“And if I don’t return, go find Rentt. Understand?”

Rentt also occasionally stopped by the classroom. He was actually quite knowledgeable in his own way. Part of that was because I’d forced him to learn certain things, but most of it was because he recognized the importance of knowledge. It made up for what he lacked in fighting skill and magic. In truth, he was a better teacher for young students than your average scholar.

“Y-Yup. He lives at your house, right?” Gerge asked.

“Yes. Now, I’m off.”

The air in the sewers was moist, and a thin stream of water ran down the middle of the tunnel. As I proceeded deeper within, I felt the mana around me grow thicker.

“I hope he hasn’t gone too far in...” I prayed.

Immediately after I murmured that, I saw a child lying face down a short distance away. I ran over to his side. A quick glance confirmed that it was Jad.

I checked to see if he was still breathing and sighed in relief. “He’s still alive. And he’s not drained, it seems. But...why is he unconscious?”

Suddenly, the answer to the mystery materialized right in front of me.

“You’re going to...take him away?”

When I looked up, I saw the blurry outline of a girl in white. I stood and pointed my staff at the apparition.

“I’m afraid so. You should leave as well,” I suggested.

I’d made sure to issue a warning, but the girl in white opened her mouth

widely—almost inhumanly—and screeched, “I won’t let you! Won’t let you! WON’T LET YOU!”

Her mouth was much larger than any human’s, and her gaping maw spouted fangs that lashed out at me. It was a mimic, a monster that pretended to be a human so that it could drain its prey of strength and then eat them. Fortunately, this mimic seemed rather weak.

“Foteia Borivaas.”

I unleashed a single fire spell, and it consumed and incinerated the mimic. I picked up the magic crystal that had dropped from its ashen remains, then picked up Jad and quickly left the sewers. I also made a mental note to report this entrance to the adventurer’s guild.



“Lorraine, you’re finally back,” Rentt greeted me when I arrived back at the classroom. While the mask obscured his face, I could tell from his demeanor that he was tired.

“Oh, you were here, Rentt?”

“Gerge came to find me. He was panicking. I figured you’d be fine, so I decided to check in on the students instead. If things had been more serious, you would’ve found some other way to contact me anyway.”

“I’m grateful. The fruits of our long acquaintance, hm?”

“So, is he okay?” Rentt asked.

“I’ve given him a potion, so he should wake up soon. He wasn’t particularly drained either. Still, I’m going to give him a talk about going into the sewers.”

“Ah, so he’s getting a lecture. Poor kid,” Rentt said sympathetically.

“Would you like to sit in on the lecture?”

I’d only offered in jest, but Rentt laughed dryly. “I’m a little too old for that, aren’t I?”

This was what my daily life in Maalt was like. Perhaps I would enjoy it if these days were to continue on indefinitely, but that hadn’t been an option as of late.

Even this little incident was pretty dangerous. Maalt had plenty to offer, but it was still perilous. I needed to make sure that these children understood that.

I quietly renewed my oath to myself.

The Much Admired Isaac

“Oh, it’s Rentt. Perhaps it’s fate that we’ve run into each other in a place like this.”

I turned toward the cheerful yet cool voice and saw a familiar face. It belonged to an elegant man with pale white skin—a faint blue-ish tinge to it—beautiful silver hair, and supernaturally charming eyes.

He was Isaac the vampire, and he served the Latuule family as the butler. He was the one who’d gotten me involved with Laura Latuule in the first place, and he was also teaching me how to wield my vampiric abilities.

It was relatively rare to run into Isaac in the middle of the city. He was hard to pin down, and while he was often out shopping for his mistress, I’d almost never seen him in town. I’d seen him once or twice since I’d met him, but I didn’t remember ever running into him before that.

Given how much Isaac stood out in a crowd, I would have remembered seeing him even if I didn’t know him, so that struck me as somewhat unusual. I had a few guesses as to why that was, though. He was an old and very powerful vampire, much more powerful than I was in every way imaginable. When you were that skilled, it was easy to hide your presence from those weaker than you. Furthermore, as a vampire, he was nocturnal. I had no doubt that the skill of remaining unseen came easily to him.

I wondered if I would ever catch up to him, but I knew that day might very well never come.

“I didn’t expect you to believe in fate, Isaac,” I remarked. I figured vampires weren’t particularly religious.

“Ha ha, what an interesting thing to say. Perhaps I do, and perhaps I do not,” he said with a meaningful tilt of his head.

I was curious about the meaning behind his words, but it looked like he wasn't going to answer me. I decided to end this coincidental conversation and just extract myself from the situation. Besides, I'd already told Lorraine that I would make her something nice for dinner, so I had quite a bit of shopping left to do. I needed to get home and start prepping the food.

When I tried to excuse myself, Isaac suddenly said, "Don't be in such a hurry to leave, Rentt. Please."

"Why not? I actually am in a hurry."

"Oh, are you? There must be some purpose to us meeting like this, so there was something I wanted you to help me with."

Isaac gazed at me, looking like a sad puppy. All vampires were handsome and beautiful, and Isaac was no exception. That sort of hangdog expression worked very well with his features, but it didn't make him adorable or anything. Rather, there was a strange, supernatural charm to that look.

Now, I could easily say no, but Isaac was my mentor. I owed him for teaching me how to use my vampiric abilities. Also, my mentors back home had mercilessly driven into my head that a mentor's request was like the word of the gods. I had no choice.

"Okay, fine," I agreed.



"Hey, Rentt! Over here!"

"Please wait up, young master!"

A little boy was running around the yard and issuing orders to me. He was perhaps ten years old, and his name was Frahe. Several of the families in this region were known as great households, and he was part of one of them, the Muze family.

This had been Isaac's destination, and since he needed to speak with Frahe's parents, he asked if I could watch the boy for a bit. I'd been looking after him for what felt like an eternity now.

"Sheesh, Rentt, you have no endurance! Isaac can play with me until I get

tired!”

“Impressive. He’s a different breed entirely.” I couldn’t picture Isaac playing with a child, but I knew that he’d look cool and collected no matter what he was doing.

“Yes! Isaac is amazing! You should learn from him! But...” Frahe’s expression turned sad.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Well, I’ll eventually inherit the family title. I can’t help but wonder that when the time comes, will I be able to do as well as Isaac?”

A city council made up of members of the most powerful families in the region ran the city of Maalt, and the Muze family was on that council. The Latuule family was as well, and it seemed Isaac often attended council meetings as Laura’s representative. Laura couldn’t physically attend those meetings now since she was asleep, but even before all that, she’d rarely gone to a meeting herself.

Because of Isaac’s involvement in the council, the young boy saw him as a model to look up to. Unfortunately, he was comparing himself to an absurd standard.

“There’s no need to do things like Isaac,” I said to Frahe. “Or rather, I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Huh?!” he exclaimed.

“He is something other than an ordinary human, and if you tried to emulate him, the effort would end up crushing you. I doubt there’s a person in the world who can do things the way he does. The important thing is to do your best and find the right way for you to serve as the master of this house.”

Frahe thought for a moment, as though the idea had struck him by surprise, and then nodded. “Rentt, you have a good head on your shoulders! I might let you serve as my adjutant in the future!”

Frahe once again started running around the yard, and I ended up having to chase him around until sunset.



“Thank you so much for your help, Rentt. You were a lifesaver,” Isaac said on the way home.

“Really?”

“Yes. Frahe also looked like he had sorted something out in his head. It seems he’s been struggling with something.”

“Oh, about that...” I explained to Isaac that Frahe had been feeling inferior because he compared himself to Isaac.

“I see. I never imagined that would be it. Nevertheless, it was a bit awful of you to say that I wasn’t human.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but...”

Frahe probably hadn’t taken my words literally, so I doubted it would ever be a problem.

Isaac sighed. “There are times when I can’t tell if you’re brave or just thoughtless, Rentt.”

“If I weren’t a bit of both, I wouldn’t have ended up this way.”

“Indeed. You have a point there,” Isaac conceded, breaking out into a grin.

When I got home, Lorraine was furious that I’d been out so late. It wasn’t because she’d been worried about me, but rather because dinner had been delayed. However, once I prepared our meal with the various expensive ingredients I’d received from the Muze family, Lorraine said, “Make sure you go help Isaac from time to time. This more than makes up for the effort.” She then began happily enjoying her meal.

The Princess’s Table

“Are you serious?” Lorraine asked, looking like she had a headache.

Deep down, I agreed with her, but all I could do was nod quietly.

In front of us sat a worn old table. It was part of the request I had accepted, so we had it on loan.

A few hours ago, Wolf had brought me a job. It wasn't quite an official request, but there were jobs that Wolf gave directly to the most suitable adventurer. This request happened to be one of those. He'd chosen me for it because I just happened to have the widest circle of acquaintances in Maalt.

"What are you talking about?" I asked Wolf.

"I want you to find the artisan who made this table."

When I followed Wolf's gaze, I saw a worn old table sitting there. Now it all made sense. I could definitely handle this much. I began listing carpenters here in town.

Wolf added, "Evidently, this table was made fifty years ago."

"Pardon?"

"Like I said, it's fifty years old. The carpenter who made it was in his twenties at the time."

"Then that'd mean they're well into their seventies. They're already retired. To find someone who's retired..." I was pretty sure that was impossible.

Wolf looked at me pleadingly, an unusual expression for him. "That's exactly it. Since everyone who was offered the job said they couldn't do it, it ended up coming to me. Please. This is a request from a princess. It's hard to turn down."

It wasn't that princesses in their seventies didn't exist, but it was still hard to imagine.

"She's in her twenties," Wolf continued, proving my assumption incorrect. "She inherited the table from the original owner, her grandmother. And her grandmother's dying wish was that this table be returned to its creator. She even included in her will that the princess wouldn't inherit her estate if she didn't."

"Oh boy, that sounds like a headache and a half."

"Yeah, it is. So please, do this as a favor to me."

“Okay, fine,” I agreed.

While I had the option of declining, Wolf seemed to be in a real bind. I figured no one other than me would accept the job, so I decided I’d take it. I also figured I might as well ask Lorraine to help me. She resisted at first, but in the end, she relented.

“Fine. But if we’re going to do this, we’re going to find this man,” she declared.

And so began our search for this carpenter.



“Is this the right place?” I asked, looking at the weathered old house.

“Yeah, it should be,” Lorraine replied.

“It took less time than I expected,” said the other person present. Her golden blonde hair was cropped into a short bob, and her eyes sparkled with an inborn pride. She was a noblewoman with a faintly Machiavellian air, and she was our employer for this job.

When we reported that we’d found the person she was looking for, she had immediately come to see us. She was remarkably quick to move for a noble.

“Perhaps it would have been better for you to have waited until we were certain,” Lorraine offered.

The woman politely chuckled. “My grandmother told me that he would deny it if asked, so the only way to be certain is to watch his reaction when he sees the table.”

“Is that why I had to carry it all this way?” I inquired.

The table in question was strapped to my back. We’d brought it because the noblewoman had asked us to.

The noblewoman looked at me with a faintly apologetic look, but continued, “Well then, shall we say hello?” She stepped forward and opened the door to the house.

“Well, that part of her is certainly noble,” I quipped.

“They’re all like that. But she is rather friendly. I’d say she’s a good noble,” Lorraine observed.

I nodded. While I got the sense that she went her own way, there was no indication that she actively looked down on us.

We then followed the woman into the house.



“I’m not the craftsman,” the old man said with a sullen expression, rejecting the idea in a low voice.

The noblewoman turned to us as though to say, “See, I told you that would happen.”

Lorraine and I exchanged glances. This seemed like quite a hassle. I was wondering just how we were going to sort this out when, surprisingly, the noblewoman offered a way forward.

“Then you are fine if we break it?” she asked as she looked at the table strapped on my back.

With a note of panic, the old man exclaimed, “Wha?! Isn’t this a memento of your grandmother?!”

The noblewoman laughed. “Not at all. This is my inheritance. It’s mine to do with as I please. Very well, Rentt, please ready the sledgehammer.”

As ordered, I retrieved a sledgehammer from my magic bag. The noblewoman was stronger than she looked, and she picked up the heavy tool without any visible strain. I realized then that she knew how to use magic to enhance her physical abilities.

Just before the hammer was about to make contact with the table, the old man intervened.

“Please wait!” he shouted.

“Oh?” said the noblewoman.

“Please don’t destroy it. Yes, I’m the one who made it.”

The noblewoman set down the sledgehammer. “Then you should have said so

earlier.”

Nothing particularly noteworthy happened after that. The old man explained why he’d sent the table to the woman’s grandmother. They had once been lovers, but her family had forced them to separate. Since he couldn’t marry her, he’d made the table for her so that she always had something to remember him by. It was because she’d kept that promise that we’d brought the table to him.

Once the old man had finished his story, the noblewoman asked, “So, how do I open this?”

“What? No one told you?” the old man asked in surprise.

“It was my grandmother’s dying wish that I ask you directly. I had to agree to that condition when I inherited the family title.”

“I see. That’s very much like her. Here, this is how you open it.”

The old man moved the various protrusions on the underside of the table, and the tabletop opened like a clamshell, revealing two envelopes within. One was addressed to the old man, while the other...

“A last will and testament. So you were here for that?” the old man guessed.

“Yes, that’s correct. My business here is finished. I return the table to your care.”

The noblewoman turned to Lorraine and me and said, “Come, time to go.” Then she quickly left the house.

We followed behind her. When I turned to glance behind me, I saw the old man weeping as he read the letter addressed to him.



“So were you really here to get that will?” I asked the noblewoman.

She chuckled and inquired, “Oh? What else could it be?”

“If all you wanted was the will, you could’ve just broken that table.”

“If you understand that much, then there’s no need to ask, is there? Lorraine, this man’s a bit of a boor, isn’t he?”

“That part of his charm, m’lady.”

The women exchanged chuckles. I felt faintly irritated by their conversation, but their contented faces did make me feel I'd been a bit boorish to ask such a question.

The Manor During a Storm

The manor door opened with a click. The master of the manor smirked. It was pouring rain outside, and no decent guest would arrive during this sort of weather, but the master was pleased for some reason. It was a strange sight.

A hooded man came through the door. "I'm sorry for the intrusion. It's pouring outside. May I rest here briefly?"

Ordinarily, the master would have turned him away, suspecting him to be a beggar. However, he welcomed the visitor with open arms.

"Ah, welcome. Please come in. I have warm soup if you would like some."

The guest seemed a bit confused at the generous welcome, but he noted his appreciation and introduced himself.

"I'm grateful for your hospitality. My name is Rentt, and I'm an adventurer. This mask is to hide a disfiguring scar on my face. Please don't let it bother you."



A certain amount of time had passed since Rentt, the adventurer, had eaten and retired to the guest room.

"Surely he's asleep by now."

The master of the manor stood up from his chair. It was very late. Usually, he would have been asleep by now. Instead, he quietly snuck into Rentt's room. He carefully lifted the blanket and exposed Rentt's neck.

"Ah, how delightful. I can't wait any longer!"

The master lunged at his prey...

"Yeah, I figured there was something wrong with you." Rentt grabbed the master's face with a vise-like grip.

“Wha?! Y-You’re awake?!”

“The whole reason I came out this way was because the relatives of the people who have vanished in the area asked me to. How many people did you attack?”

“Blast!” The master of the manor was well aware of his own guilt, and at first, he looked around for an escape. But his efforts were in vain.

“This is where it ends for you,” said. Then a deep darkness spread out in front of him and sucked the master into it.

“What are you?!” the master cried.

“A creature closer to the darkness than you, I suppose. Am I a creature? Anyway, it’s not something for you to worry about.”

With that, the master’s consciousness faded into oblivion.

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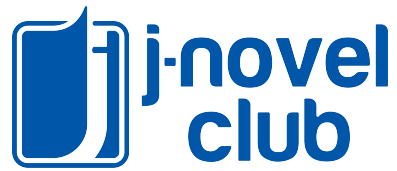
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by Yu Okano

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